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ABSTRACT

This book provides early childhood educators with perspectives and tools that will enable them to strengthen parents and families during the child's earliest year of development. The 25 chapters are divided into 6 parts or themes. Part one focuses on understanding families as learners from an ecological and empathetic perspective, with the premise that families can be sources of strength for adults and children when they are supported and nurtured. Part two examines the process of relating to the special needs of families from a supportive, yet realistic, framework. This section describes a proactive approach to developing positive and equitable relations with families experiencing special needs. Part three, on parenting and the family learning process, emphasizes the critical role that parents play in the development of healthy families. Focusing on parent education and family support, part four examines ways that early childhood professionals can provide educational and related support resources for parents and families. Part five addresses the important topic of communicating with parents and families, discussing the attributes of effective communication and the processes involved in using these attributes. Finally, part six pulls together the various aspects of supporting parents and families into a workable plan of action. The theme of involving parents and families is used to articulate the essential concepts and practices for achieving success in the development of family involvement programs. Contains 450 references. (HTH)

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Strengthening Parents and Families
During the Early Childhood Years

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Strengthening Parents And Families During the Early Childhood Years

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Preface

As we experience unprecedented change in our society, the field of education is being transformed. Early childhood education, for example, is serving as the context for the initiation of revolutionary practices that are based on decades of research as well as on the changing needs of parents and families. The impact of economic, social, and educational events has created an untenable situation for many families. The need for supporting parents and families during the early childhood years has never been greater.

The purpose of this book is to provide early childhood educators with perspectives and tools that enable them to strengthen parents and families during the child's earliest years of development. Six themes provide the framework for this effort: understanding families as learners, relating to the special needs of families, parenting and the family learning process, parent education and family support, communicating with parents and families, and involving parents and families.

Part One of the book focuses on *Understanding Families as Learners* from an ecological and empathetic perspective. The basic premise is that families can be sources of strength for adults and children when they are supported and nurtured in meaningful ways. Concepts, practices, and issues related to understanding and supporting families as learners are discussed. Two major precepts are woven through the material in this part of the book: that parents and families need to be understood from the perceptual realities that they believe in, and that early childhood professionals need to form empowering relationships with families as early as is possible in the family's development.

Part Two examines the process of *Relating to the Special Needs of Families* from a supportive and yet realistic framework. The nature of "special needs family situations" is explored within the realities of the stress that parents and children confront. The nature of different types of special needs families is also presented. A major focus in this part of the book is on helping the early childhood professional understand the sources and attributes of special needs family situations. A proactive approach is offered with regards to developing positive and equitable relationships with families experiencing special needs. The reality that many risk factors that lead to special needs can be prevented is discussed and strategies for such prevention are explicated.

Part Three of the book emphasizes the critical role that parents play in the development of healthy families. The theme of *Parenting and the Family Learning Process* is fully articulated. The multiple roles parents perform are detailed and parents' special role as the child's primary teacher is fully discussed. In addition, the concept of parental integrity is explored with special attention given to strategies for use in helping parents develop conditions in which their integrity is strengthened. Examples of successful early childhood strategies for promoting parental integrity and family well-being are also presented.

Part Four examines ways that early childhood professionals can provide educational and related support resources for parents and families. *Parent Education and Family Support* is the focus of this part of the book. The critical need for addressing the basic needs of parents and children as integral to parent education is emphasized. A plethora of strategies and practices that have proven effective in parent education and family support are fully explored.

Part Five of the book addresses the important topic of *Communicating with Parents and Families.* Communication is viewed as the central element in the development of viable parent-family-professional relationships. The attributes of effective communication and the processes involved in using these attributes are fully discussed. The realities of parent-professional tensions is explored with the emphasis on proactive and preventive strategies. In this sense, conflict and confrontation are viewed as opportunities for learning.

Part Six is devoted to pulling together the various aspects of supporting parents and families into a workable plan of action. The theme of *Involving Parents and Families* is used to articulate the essential concepts and practices for achieving success in the development of family involvement programs. A supportive framework is presented along with specific strategies, activities, and resources.

Ultimately, our work with parents and families during the early childhood years must focus on supporting and strengthening them in their goal of having a meaningful and productive life. If this book furthers that mission, the purpose for writing it will have been achieved.

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University of South Carolina - Columbia
September, 1993

Part One

UNDERSTANDING FAMILIES AS LEARNERS

In too many cases families are seen as statistics, problems, arenas of social deterioration, or as the focus of research projects. While in one or more dimensions families are the center of these perspectives, they are much more. Above all families are learners! They are *learning systems* in which individuals develop their identity and actualize their talents and skills in many different ways. Early childhood professionals understand the broad meaning of the *families as learners* philosophy. Their programs and practices have historical roots that value this vital human learning system as the primary place and process where human beings acquire their initial sense of efficacy. Yet in too many instances families are not treated in a learning, growing manner.

The focus of *Part One* of this book is on understanding the family as a proactive learning ecology where children and parents attempt to articulate their identities in positive ways. Understanding this *hope of families* is essential to understanding the many challenges they encounter in trying to realize it. This orientation toward understanding families emphasizes the strengths and potentialities of parents and children as they emerge during the early years of life. It also recognizes the critical need for community support for family life. The dynamic relationships among families and other human social systems is an integral part of this understanding process. Families are not isolated, static parts of life; they are dynamic and interactive human learning systems.

Early childhood professionals must first understand *how families learn and develop*. **Chapter One** explores the intricacies of how professionals can learn about families. It provides an overview of the tools that can and should be used in gaining insights on how families develop and learn over the life span. These tools include both theoretical perspectives on how families function and practical insights professionals can use in studying the family building process.

Understanding the *dynamics of how families respond to change* within their various contexts and relationships is essential to developing proactive strategies for supporting them. **Chapter Two** attempts to involve the reader in examining the *systems perspective* of how families develop and change in relationship to their environment. Coming to understand the *relationship system* that comprises family learning is critical to the professional's development of a sensitive and effective way of relating to the family's need. It is particularly important for professionals to understand how families develop their social and emotional identity and to realize the influence of this process on the various aspects of the development of parents and their children. Finally, the recognition of the role of the early childhood educator in promoting proactive family development is explored.

What are the subtle, yet powerful dimensions of family learning? **Chapter Three** addresses the many facets of family relationship building as they relate to the learning and development of children and parents. *Rituals, space, time, and family artifacts* are presented as dimensions of family learning. These elements of family learning are what comprises the *culture of each family* and they become the foundation upon which children draw from in their initial learning ventures. Strategies for understanding these dimensions of learning and utilizing them in shaping a family-school partnership are explored. Ultimately, this chapter engages the reader in examining their understanding of what is important to families as they learn and grow, and in exploring their orientation as family helpers to promoting what is positive and nurturing for families.

Beneath the daily interactions of parents and children are processes that influence how and what they do in other social settings. **Chapter Four** examines these processes with the focus on how parents and children use them in promoting or impeding each other's lives. This chapter examines questions that early childhood professionals need to consider in their program development and planning: How do families relate to each other within the family system? What are the predominant modes of family-community relationship patterns? How can schools promote healthy family relationships? These and other questions are raised within the thematic focus of developing positive family-school relationships.

Family-centered early childhood programs are recognized as essential to creating positive and nurturing communities. *Part One* of this book attempts to involve the reader in examining the many complexities of developing a family-responsive early childhood program. It asks the key question: What are families about as learning and developing human beings?

Chapter One

LEARNING ABOUT FAMILIES

In attempting to educate and care for young children, early childhood educators must relate their efforts to the varying contexts of families. The child is part of the family system and influenced by all that happens within it. Likewise, the family is part of the larger social system and is impacted by social, economic, and political forces taking place within this system. For example, what teachers and caregivers do at school influences the nature of the parent-child relationship at home. In a similar fashion, parental experiences in the workplace influence their family behavior (Swick & Taylor, 1982). Critical to acquiring a full understanding of children's functioning at school and child care is a knowledge of what happens in the family. Such an understanding enables us to design and carry out programs that meet the needs of children and families.

Studying Families

While global perspectives on family dynamics are valuable, it is critical to study about the local needs and situations of families. National studies do provide many valuable resources: trends regarding the size of families, new insights on family structures, current issues facing the nation's families, and many other helpful pieces of information. From studies at the national level we have learned that today's families are smaller, very diverse in structure, and confronting totally new challenges. Yet each family and community is unique and needs studying with regard to its particular needs. There are many processes the early childhood educator can use in carrying out the study of families.

Gathering **demographic data** on families in the local community can be very helpful. Demographic profiles can provide a "local picture" of the families you work with and involve in programs with young children. You may find, for example, that eighty percent of the children reside in single-parent households or that a significant number of children live in homes that are unheated. Case studies of several urban areas found significant numbers of children homeless (Children's Defense Fund, 1989).

Data from demographic profiles enable us to design our programs to meet specific needs. One particular value of demographic data is that it offers us the "changing picture" we need as families grow, develop and respond to varying social and economic challenges. With the increasing technological sophistication of census data, it is now possible for early childhood educators to acquire a continuing picture of the families with which they work.

The use of **parent surveys** can provide another type of information pertinent to the family and its role in educating children. For example, a survey of parental talents, skills, interests, and hobbies provides us with information on parental values and on information related to their possible use as resources in the classroom. Other surveys can be conducted to gather input on ideas for parent education projects and parent-teacher involvement efforts. In addition, questionnaires can be used to acquire information on how parents and children perceive the school. The way children and parents see the school is revealing not only of their specific attitudes of schooling but also of their broader perspectives of life. Knowing how families perceive this aspect of life can help us better design programs to support their positive involvement (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Early childhood educators are taught to critically observe young children's behavior and development. This same skill needs to be applied to our interactions with families. The **observation** of families is helpful to gaining insights on their particular orientation. Questions such as the following need to be considered in making these observations: What are family interests? Are families spending time together? Do parents attend school activities when they can? Are families involved in the community in productive ways? Answers to these questions should influence our instructional approach as well as the ways in which we relate to families of children in our programs. For example, we may learn that more families would be involved if our programs were more flexible, inviting, and supportive (Swick, 1991).

Direct contact with parents and children is one of the most beneficial modes of learning about families. Contacts at school, in the home or through community programs help us see parents in action. Face to face meetings between parents and teachers help to clarify particular needs of the family as well as special concerns teachers may have. Further, such contacts are the beginning of parent-teacher efforts to use home and school as a means of nurturing children and adults toward more productive living. Schaefer (1983) explains that continuous, meaningful communication between parents and teachers is the best method for assuring that we as early childhood educators are aware of the total family situation as we plan and carry out programs.

The Foundation Of Family Studies

There are theoretical perspectives that enable us to study families. In turn, information acquired in this way can help us design better programs. Theory building is an important part of any social scientific process. The process of theory building proceeds in an orderly manner: initially one establishes a hypothesis about particular variables; the hypothesis is then tested and either confirmed or disconfirmed. When a hypothesis is confirmed through multiple studies it acquires the status of a proposition, a principle, or a generalization. In the behavioral or social sciences, hypotheses can gain the status of a proposition if they are true in a majority of cases. Propositions which are related to each other may be gathered together to form a theory about human behavior. Then this theory and the propositions that it includes can be used to predict and explain other behavior.

The most reliable theories are based on years of empirical research. In the study of families, theories are only in their beginning stages. Therefore, they are usually called theoretical frameworks to distinguish them from more sophisticated formulations. Currently, there are five theoretical frameworks in family study that early childhood educators need to know and use in their work with families (Swick, 1987). A brief review of each of these theoretical frameworks provides some useful insights on how we can apply them to our work with families.

The Structural-Functional Approach

The basic idea of this approach is that what works to maintain the society will survive. This framework sees the family as a subsystem of the larger society. Society is a social system made up of many subsystems such as families, schools, government agencies, churches, and other groups. Whatever is functional to the maintenance of the "system" will survive. Whatever is dysfunctional to the maintenance of the system will disappear. The question asked by proponents of this theoretical framework is: What function does a subsystem serve in maintaining the total system? (Nass, 1978). It is important to remember that each subsystem is itself made up of subsystems. The family, for example, is made up of individual members.

In viewing the family as a subsystem of society, there are three main categories of functions to be considered:

- The functions of the family for society.
- The functions of the family for self-maintenance.
- The functions of the family with respect to individual family members.

The family serves many functions in society. One might generate a long list but for certain the procreation function would be included in the list. If families did not create new members, the society would cease to exist. Besides the procreation function, in our society the family serves to transmit the cultural values of the society to the children. In fact, some students of family life say that today's families have moved beyond simply transmitting to shaping societal values.

The family itself is a system that is being maintained and anything which contributes to the survival and maintenance of that system is functional. There exist many opinions on the changes taking place in families as society changes. For example, the division of labor process (which is a significant principle of the structural-functional approach) is rapidly shifting in families today. Some theoreticians note that the changes are influencing families to dissolve—at least as families have traditionally been conceived. Others, however, note that families are realigning their roles and functions to accommodate the changes in their environment (Powers, 1985).

Like any theory, the structural-functional approach has limits. In many respects it is too simplistic. For example, within this framework divorce is viewed as dysfunctional because it disrupts the maintenance of the system. However, in some cases divorce actually "functions" to dissolve an unhealthy situation. Another limitation is the rigid role assignments implied by this framework—placing men in instrumental roles and women in more affective roles. These limitations do not detract, however, from the value of seeing the family as a part of the larger societal systems.

Exchange Theory

An important theoretical development in family studies in the 1960s was the elevation of exchange theory to a place of importance (Broderick, 1971). It has stimulated a great deal of research and discussion regarding the dynamics of family living. It is best described by Lederer and Jackson's (1969) principle of quid pro quo. This is the idea of "something for something" or that a person will do something for another person in order to obtain something from that person. In this framework, family behavior is explained as "exchanges of behavior."

A current application of this concept is in the analysis of family power as enacted in parent-child relationships. Exchange theory suggests that parents and children attempt to identify acceptable "exchanges" that will create some form of balance in their relationships. For example, children learn particular exchanges that achieve some harmony for them and their parents. A successful day at the child care center may bring a treat of french fries or a new toy. Later more abstract events may suffice to achieve this exchange process. Naturally, as the family develops, the content of the exchanges change and indeed the entire process is modified. In cases where families fail to make adaptations in the exchange process, various difficulties can arise: aggressive relationships, isolation from each other, rigid role assignments, and many other distortions (Swick, 1987).

Like other theoretical perspectives, exchange theory has clear limitations. It does not account for the many relationship patterns in families that emerge from non-exchange variables. For example, early mother-infant interactions appear to be more mutually growth oriented than exchange oriented. In addition, many parent-child transactions occur within a context of natural growth not requiring specific exchanges; that is, they are a part of the family's system: eating, sleeping, caring, and supporting (Swick, 1989). Exchange theory is helpful in assessing family orientations toward internal relationships and in acquiring perspectives about family values. It is, however, only a piece of the larger family system and needs to be kept in that perspective.

Symbolic-Interaction Theory

While the exchange theorist emphasizes the confrontational nature of relationships, symbolic-interactionists focus attention on individuals as they react and interact in social roles (Perlman & Duck, 1987). Emphasis is placed on individuals as significant sources in the development of social behavior. Interaction is the complex process whereby one person's social behavior results from and is modified by another's actions. This approach is derived from the field of social psychology. An example of this perspective is found in the colicky behavior of a newborn. Even in the best of circumstances, the mother and father appear to have more hostility (albeit often hidden hostility) toward the colicky child than the child without colic.

In this theory, behavior is to a large extent predetermined by the roles that individuals play. These roles are then placed in the context of the family's interactions with major emphasis on the affective nature of these interactions. For example, in some families mothers are identified as being the nurturers and everyone comes to expect them to carry out this role in their family interactions. Yet, as families become more focused on companionship roles, this nurturing role is becoming diffused to other family members (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

A clear limitation of this theory is the lack of attention given to the structural aspects of family life. Certainly companionship and related affective dimensions of family life are most significant; yet structural dimensions such as developmental stage of family life must also be accounted for in any theory. The major strength of this perspective is the focus on relationships as they occur within the developing family. As societal agencies become focused on instrumental elements of living, families are becoming primary centers of nurturance and companionship.

The Developmental Approach

This perspective is a composite of two other theories (structural-functionalist and symbolic-interactionist) and of elements of developmental psychology. Developmentalists have added to the concepts borrowed from the other theories a time dimension or the idea that a family's behavior can in part be attributed to its developmental stage of life (for example, early childhood).

The family's life cycle is divided into roughly eight stages progressing from early marriage, to child bearing, to families with preschool-aged children, to school-aged attributes, to the adolescent context, to emptying the "nest," and finally to the later years of life (Duvall, 1977). With increments in the life span, major changes in family styles, and as a result of "alterations" in the life-span framework itself, this developmental framework is being refined through new research (Galinsky, 1987). Recent work, for example, notes that families vary in how much time they spend in different stages and indeed in whether or not they experience all of the stages.

A central principle of this theory is that families must accomplish various developmental tasks at each stage of the family life cycle. Failure to negotiate these tasks may instigate problems later in the family's history. For example, failure of the spouses to establish nurturing relationships early in the marriage may cause detachment conflicts in parent-child relationships later (Cowan & Cowan, 1992). The developmental perspective is gaining new significance as family styles diverge and family issues become more complex. During the 1990s it is likely that family scholars will begin to focus on "family delays" much as early learning theorists focused on "developmental delays" in children over the past decade (Cheal, 1991).

The major criticism of this framework is its emphasis on middle class families with regards to defining developmental tasks for families. Teen-parents, single-parent families, and minority families (to cite a few divergent styles) may confront different developmental challenges. Further, by the nature of utilizing an age-defined structure for articulating developmental stages, this theory eliminates many important variables that families deal with "developmentally." Still it has value in providing a broad scheme for viewing family developments.

The Ecological Approach

This conceptual framework sees the family as an ecological system in which individuals develop their socio-emotional selfhood. As a system, the family interacts with other systems in pursuing its affective development. Naturally, all events that transact with the family (economic, social, educational) influence the members' socio-emotional functioning. Bronfenbrenner (1979) is one of the leading proponents of this theoretical perspective. He provides a conceptual model for use in visualizing how this approach works. In his model, the family unit is a microsystem in which individuals carry out multiple transactions that greatly influence their behavior both as individuals and as a group. The family, of course, must relate to other systems. Thus, exosystems are places that are external to, yet clearly related to the family, such as school, workplace, and church. A critical "system" in the ecological framework is the mesosystem. It is any context or process that "supports" the family in its internal functioning and enables the family to form viable alliances with other systems. A quality child care program, for example, might enable parents to negotiate their work lives better. In this view the child care is a "mesosystem."

Critics of the ecological theory claim it is too broad; failing to account for the individual nuances of family members. Others point to the limits of this approach to deal with exceptions to ecological principles. Yet family scholars among ecological advocates point out that it is still emerging as a theory and never claimed to account for all individual behaviors. As the family (and family issues) become more interrelated with all of society's "systems" this framework has gained in usage.

Applications To Working With Families

Family theories provide early childhood educators with perceptual tools to use in better understanding and relating to the needs of the families they serve. There are, of course, adaptations one needs to account for in applying these theories to practical usage:

1. In applying any single theory to family issues, it must be remembered that it represents only one possible view of the family.

2. As different theoretical frameworks are applied, keep in mind that these theories are open to change as new data is generated.

3. Regardless of which framework (or frameworks) one uses in studying families, it must be remembered that information gathered is confidential.

As professionals attempt to study and facilitate the development and learning of families, the following need close attention:

1. What perspectives am I using in studying families?

2. Will this perspective provide the kind of information needed?

3. How can the information gathered further the goal of supporting families?

Ultimately, early childhood professionals must consider their perceptions of families and how these perceptions influence their relationships with parents and children. Through continued study of professional journals, self-assessment, and through continuing work with families, early childhood educators can maintain and refine a positive, supportive approach to relating to the needs of families.

Chapter Two

UNDERSTANDING FAMILY DYNAMICS

Whenever societies experience dramatic change, their basic institutions undergo major alterations. For centuries families have served as the basic socializing arena for societies of many different orientations. It is no surprise that contemporary concerns about the "state of the family" have stimulated a myriad of interpretations regarding the present and future functioning of the family. Perspectives range from the view that the family is near extinction to the notion that it is emerging as the healthiest part of the social structure (Howard, 1978). Recent efforts to study families have raised some important issues (Cheal, 1991): What is meant by the term family? How do families function in a rapidly changing society? How can early childhood educators gain insights into the ways families are functioning? How have families in the past responded to change? What are the major current concerns about the family and how can these concerns best be handled? Finally, how can early childhood educators best support families? While answers to these questions continue to emerge, there are some insights the professional can draw from in shaping their orientation toward working with parents and families.

The Meanings Of Family

The proceedings of the 1980 White House Conference on Families served to focus on the difficulty people have in agreeing upon a common definition to the term family. After considerable discussion, the participants agreed to disagree and changed the word family to families (Berger & Berger, 1983). This shift in emphasis reflects the varied perspectives on family life that are held by people in different interest groups. The traditional view of the family as having two parents and two to four children with one parent (usually the mother) in the home full time is no longer the perception or the reality held and/or experienced by most people. Families now exhibit various arrangements: single-parent, two-parent, step-parent, and other arrangements which are often the result of a mix of family-society changes (Scott, 1985).

One way to gain a clearer picture of what is meant by family is to look at its unique characteristics. Lancaster (1985) notes that the human family performs three functions that empower it to flourish and evolve toward a higher level of functioning: *the sharing of food, the division of labor for* *having a food maintenance process, and the postponement of immediate needs gratification.* While there are animals who perform some of these functions, only the human family enacts them in a life-span context. For example, male monkeys do not share food with their offspring and do not postpone their needs gratification. In effect, even in the early years of the evolution of the human family, the ability to share, plan ahead, and divide work for life-maintenance were crucial to survival (Lancaster, 1985).

With a viable life-maintenance system, the family was able to develop a socio-emotional arrangement that provided individuals with a uniqueness and yet allowed the group to emerge as a special human entity. The family context also empowered individuals to pursue extra-family tasks such as community organization and technological invention. In simple social contexts the family used this basic process of sharing, planning, and teaming to sustain their ecological well-being. Nested within the confines of close relatives and friends, the family was able to achieve a workable match with the environment with exceptions being famine and war (Scott, 1985). It is noteworthy that families still perform these tasks and that it is an imbalance in carrying out these functions that place families in jeopardy.

A second and complementary mode of acquiring a better understanding of what family means is through the study of the relationships that comprise this system. *It is through family relationships that each person develops his initial identity and arrives at a definition of family.* Just as families developed a system for maintaining their physical well being, they also created an arrangement for nurturing each other's social and emotional development (Erikson, 1982). It is through intimate relationships that children find sources of strength for trust building and that parents find sources of meaning related to their adult identity. In this sense, family means that a human group develops or has developed a set of intimate, supportive relationships that enable them to pursue their full range of social and emotional skills in various settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This potential for fully developing one's socio-emotional self is a characteristic that makes human beings unique.

A third insight regarding the meaning of family relates to the way in which people acquire their cognitive skill kit. *The skills of perception, language, thinking, and related intellectual tasks appear to have emerged in correspondence with the evolution of the family* (Lancaster, 1985). Further, refinements in the family system to free its members to pursue individualized ideologies has been linked to the development of human progress in general (Burgess & Locke, 1945). Recent research on children's achievement in school confirms the critical role families play in fostering a productive context for learning and development (Swick, 1984; 1987). The family system provides two essential linkages for educational attainment: a context where basic cognitive skills can be acquired and practiced, and a support system which frees its members to refine and expand their skills in other social systems (Eklund, 1985; Swick, 1987, 1991).

Current concerns regarding the family bring into focus the multiple meanings of this term. Societal reaction that the family is disintegrating is a healthy response and indicates a recognition of the important place of the family in the society. These concerns range from observations that many families seem unable to maintain a viable life-support system to concern about the family losing its power to serve as a framework for building identity in children and adults (Laing, 1972; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). Current and past observations of the family system, while diverse in nature, point to some common and critical meanings of the term family: sharing of resources and skills, use of a team approach to problem solving and proactive living, provision for the socio-emotional development of individuals, the fostering of intimate group relationships, the development of basic cognitive skills, and the creation of a system by which human beings can progress through the life cycle in a constructive, growing manner.

How Families Deal With Change: A Systemic Perspective

A systemic view of the family as a social and emotional unit interacting with other such units enables people to better grasp how families deal with change. A systems view of development and learning recognizes the interactive nature of all systems. In this perspective the family system is in continuous interaction with other systems such as the school or the neighborhood. Each human being is a system and is a part of many other systems: family, school, workplace, and society. The outcome is a "nest" of interlocking systems comprised of individuals and groups. Changes in any system or in any part of a system influence all other elements of the context (Anderson & Carter, 1984).

Internally, the family system is comprised of the following basic elements: role assignments, structural arrangements, functional identity, and a life-maintenance process. Usually these elements interact with each other to create unique identities known as families. The functions of the family system provide a broad framework by which roles and tasks are carried out. These functions change in response to developmental shifts in the family itself and as a result of various other internal and external dynamics (Schwartzman, 1985). For example, the primary function of the family with preschool children may be seen as that of meeting the child's basic needs while families of adolescents may adapt a more career oriented function to respond to increased economic demands and/or to meet personal growth needs. The structure of the family system (nuclear, extended, single-parent) and any changes in the structure of the system impact all other elements. The loss of a spouse or a child influences family members to redefine their roles and their relationship patterns. The possible mixture of family structures, functions, role assignments, and relationship patterns is virtually unlimited. This potential for and reality of endless system patterns is why most social scientists now refer to families instead of family as their semantic framework. Further, the plurality of existing family styles is validation of the influence family-society changes have had on the family system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Cheal, 1991).

As a system the family influences and is influenced by the component parts of the ecology: physical, social, and psychological (Scott, 1985). These components interact with each other and with the other elements of the family system. For example, space has been linked to various behaviors in families. High density may act as an influence on family arguments or may serve as a creative force in stimulating unique family social actions. Social changes, whether from within the family or a part of society, impact the family situation. A rise in the cost of living combined with increased expectations regarding the quality of life have, for example, prompted many families to direct their energies toward the workplace more than in the past. This shift of energy naturally influences family dynamics and brings new stressors to all family members. While this change may be seen as negative, it could also be viewed as a catalyst for redefining family roles in a more collaborative, shared manner (Swick, 1987).

Psychological perceptions of individual family members of their family relationships are powerful influences on the way families function. Parental belief systems related to their children's functioning, for example, have been shown to correlate with how children learn and develop (Sigel, 1985). Emanating from the psychological stance of the family are various perceptual orientations that influence the family's transactions in life. How the family views the workplace, the child care center, the church, and their neighborhood influences their involvement in these systems. A viable family system is characterized as having a healthy self-image; positive perceptions and interactions with the ecology; and the ability to create productive change in their system and in the societal system (Swick, 1984).

The ecological framework of which the family system is a part includes four levels: primary, secondary, third-party, and societal.

The primary level (microsystem) of human functioning is the family system. It is within the family that children and parents learn how to function and develop as competent human beings. When this system works effectively, it provides the child with a setting to gain skills and acquire a positive self-image, and a context where parents can actualize their abilities in a close, supportive manner (Swick, 1987). When the primary system is fully functioning it energizes parents and children for having productive transactions at other levels of the human system.

The secondary level (exosystem) of functioning is any social system in which parents and children have opportunities and resources to engage in activities they have acquired in the primary system. For example, the child learns the rudiments of his language in the primary environment but applies his language in many different ways in secondary settings such as the school and the neighborhood. Secondary social systems are very important because they prompt families to refine and extend their skills and talents in ways that are not usually accessible in the primary system (Swick & Duff, 1978). These two systems (primary and secondary) are interdependent and thus meaningless when operating in isolation from each other. Effective secondary systems are responsive to family needs and provide family members with the skills and resources for dealing with change in a proactive manner (Schwartzman, 1985).

The third-party support level (mesosystem) is comprised of those forces that encourage or impede the interaction of family members. It is the functional level that can maximize the family's development. For example family services such as child care and job training programs not only strengthen the child's life but serve as psychological and social resources for parents (Pence, 1988). With the stress faced by most families support resources can function as a buffer and source of strength in relating to these stressors. Given that society is moving toward more complex arrangements where families are involved in multiple roles, many new sources of support will be needed (Schwartzman, 1985).

The fourth level of family functioning (macrosystem) occurs as family members have opportunities to practice, refine, and apply their skills in various community settings. The community plays a critical role in helping the family become fully functional and, of course, the healthy family promotes a viable society (Berger & Berger, 1983). Public policy issues influencing families range from child care to youth training projects and family housing. Current emphasis in state legislatures on early childhood education is a significant sign that this level of family support is receiving more attention (Hamburg, 1992).

The dynamics of family life are such that the four levels of functioning are continuously interacting with each other and influencing the makeup of the family. In this sense the family environment and the community environment interact to shape each other's destiny. For example, increased societal demands on the family have forced the family to look beyond the home for supports once handled internally. Changes in any of the levels of family functioning influence all of the other areas. In promoting or responding to change, families inevitably return to sharing, planning, and caring as tools for resolving problems and/or undertaking creative endeavors. In order to use these tools, families must have the resources and energy to assert themselves in proactive ways. Cutting families off from jobs, health care, educational opportunities, and other socio-psychological outlets reduces their strength to act on change in any viable way. Creative family change is best realized when the total human ecology is engaged in sharing, planning, and caring for its members (Hamburg, 1992).

Gaining Insights on Family Functioning

There are many ways to acquire insights related to the functioning of families. Some of these ways are: historical, developmental, sociological, and related analyses. Another way is to utilize assessment procedures for finding out how families perceive things and then act on the ecology. The goal of such assessment is to promote healthy family development by better understanding the dynamics of families and then creating resources to support this endeavor. This insight-assessment process needs to occur within the context of the realities of family living. Further, it should include the perceptions of family members of their "life" and how it functions and how it is influenced by the social institutions it interacts with. In this regard, their are four levels of family functioning that deserve close attention: family perceptions of what happens within the family (microsystem), family perceptions of what happens outside the family (exosystem), family perceptions of what happens regarding support systems (mesosystem), and family perceptions of what happens in the larger community (macrosystem) (Swick & Taylor, 1982).

Family Perceptions of What Happens Within the Family. When we probe questions like: How do family members see each other and their interactions within the family? we acquire a useful picture of how their life works. Consider the following as statements that provide insights regarding how families function at the primary level.

- My family is generally happy at home.
- I think of my family as a group of capable people.

- We help each other in our family.
- My family has a good sense of humor
- We do things together as a family whenever we can.
- I like being a part of my family.
- We discuss our school and work lives at home.

Responses to these statements provide a family profile on how members see themselves as functioning. The purpose of this type of assessment is to acquire an idea of how the family sees itself as functioning and to plan family-school experiences that will be supportive of the family's growth. For example, families that view themselves as less than capable could benefit from parent education programs. Families that have basically healthy perceptions of themselves can also benefit from such programs; especially when they are related to their interests and needs.

Family Perceptions of What Happens Outside The Family. Recent work in family studies has revealed the importance of how family members see themselves in settings other than the home (Schwartzman, 1985). This process can be organized in various ways; one way is to acquire information on children's perceptions of school or child care and parental perceptions of their workplace. For example, children might respond to the following questions.

- I like school.
- I am doing a good job in school.
- I play and work with others in my neighborhood.
- I am involved in church or other civic activities.

A key part of this process is to look for patterns of children's perceptions of school or of other experiences in the community. It is the pattern of perceptions that will provide us with insights on how children see themselves functioning in contexts outside the family.

A similar process can be used with parents. The following are some statements that ask parents to share their perceptions of the community.

- I like where I work.
- I am successful in my work.
- I am involved in my child's school.
- I know my child's teacher.
- I am involved in church and civic activities.
- I am viewed as a helpful and involved neighbor.

Taken in combination parent responses to these statements provide a picture of how they see themselves in relationship to the community. One example comes from the recent research of Galinsky (1987): parents who see themselves as successful in work and community roles have a positive orientation toward their children's schools.

Family Perceptions of Their Support Systems. Critical to the family's full growth and development is the existence of a usable support system. Statements such as the following can provide insights on how families see their support systems.

- My child's school is a helpful place.
- The school program is helping my child.
- I interact with my neighbors on a regular basis.
- The people I work with care about me as a person.
- I like the community I live in.

Responses to these statements may be indicative of how family members see their surroundings and their place and role in the community. It is vital that early childhood educators understand the perceptions of families toward the community. With such information plans can be developed to support the development of positive family-school-community relationships.

Family Perceptions of the Larger Community. In the family's development the community plays a major role; whether it is the immediate community or issues taking place in the larger society (Galinsky, 1990). Further, the family's perception of the community regarding their opportunities to actualize different talents is critical. Family responses to statements such as the following can provide insights on this process.

- As a parent I see many opportunities in this community for our family.
- There are places for children and young people to find meaningful enjoyment in this community.
- Our community has a good self-image.

Family responses to items such as the above provide a picture of how parents and children see their community. Families that perceive the community as an enjoyable, productive, and meaningful place to be will function quite differently than families that see only fear and despair in the community.

Insights gleaned from family assessments (such as perceptual assessment) can provide early childhood educators with vital information on the design or redesign of their programs.

Historical Perspectives On Families

Families have been a significant part of the changes that have comprised human history. History provides us with yet another "lens" by which to examine the dynamics of family life. Families have had to react to many changes: internal, environmental, and to the dynamic interactions of family-community events. The invention of the family construct itself can be viewed as a creative response by human beings to dealing with the present and future in a creative manner. It appears that early in human history it was recognized that a group effort was essential for people to survive and flourish. The identification of groups as families and clans added the benefits of stability and security (Shoumatoff, 1985).

The invention of the family empowered individuals to achieve tasks that might have been impossible in an individualized system; meeting basic needs such as food and shelter; caring for the young; tool making; and organizing social systems (Rosenburg, 1975). The use of a family-clan arrangement made it possible for the sharing of resources, a division of labor, and the potential for extending the individual's longevity. It is clear that early families were instrumental in laying a foundation for proactive living (Burgess & Locke, 1945). Yet not all elements of family life were positive; there were various issues that emerged: the potential for resisting change, abuse of individual rights, and neglect of society. History shows that families have taken on various forms, functioned in many ways, and have served diverse roles. The interaction of families and environments has created multiple cultural orientations. Regardless of such cultural diversity, families have had common challenges to deal with. The tasks of survival, longevity, community living, family harmony, and individual identity are issues faced by families throughout history (Berger & Berger, 1983).

The challenge of survival has placed families in the center of society's change process. Early in society's development, families responded to change by utilizing the resources of the clan to survive. A short life expectancy combined with an often hostile environment prompted people to use the extended kinship system (Shoumatoff, 1985). To survive, the human species had to procreate and thus when it served their purpose, polygamous arrangements were legitimized. When resources were short, such as during famines, the practice of infanticide was accepted if not encouraged. Creative use of kinship and community systems appear to have been the forces that enabled families to plan for uncertainty and thus establish the potential for humanization (Berger & Berger, 1983).

A short life span kept family development from its full actualization. Disease, famine, war, and other hostile forces took their toll on families. Osborn (1991) estimates that only one of three newborns lived to age one and of those who lived only one of three made it to adulthood. While the high death rate discouraged the development of emotional ties in families, there is evidence that the mother-child dyad was emerging as an attachment relationship. Further, the role of the father in the caring process; albeit a role heavily oriented to instrumental tasks, enabled humanity to acquire the resources for extending the life span (Rosenburg, 1975). It is worth noting that the trend of "fatherless" families in today's society has prompted many scholars to question the impact of this event in light of the historical significance of fathers (Swick, 1987).

The interdependence of family and community was in evidence early in history as clans provided the security needed to deal with life. One historical note that Shoumatoff (1984) makes is the significance of the emergence of distinct family units for social advancement. By the seventeenth century many family units acquired enough self-reliance to distinguish themselves as unique entities in the community. An integral part of this differentiation process was the improvement in parent-child relationships and the emergence of individuality as a societal construct (Burgess & Locke, 1945). The strengthening of the family made possible improvements in the child's development and thus stimulated societal growth. Industrial growth has been tied to the family's growth and other social advancements such as technology have also been related to family developments (Berger & Berger, 1983). Throughout recent history social advancements have been linked to family well-being. During the depression years of the 1930s, for example, programs aimed to strengthen families. Similarly, recent child care and family support programs have taken this same direction .

Two significant happenings can be gleaned from a study of family life in history: *the evolution of family harmony, and the corresponding emergence of "childhood" as a distinct stage of life* (Erikson, 1982). Burgess & Locke (1945) noted that as the family extended its companionship role to include socio-emotional nurturance, the civilizing process was advanced. In effect, families began to act as a proactive force in shaping the conscience of the community. The invention of "childhood" was a natural outcome of family harmony. The nurturance of the child allowed for the fuller development of human beings and unleashed a new and creative force in history. Bloom's (1985) recent anecdotal reports on the role of families in talent development is just one source of validation of this point. There is an interactive relationship between the emergence of childhood and key quality of life indicators such as longevity, invention, and human freedom (Salk, 1983). History also shows that when this harmonious family-person-society triad is ruptured it is the family that acts as the first "loop" in a correcting process. This premise seems to be at work concerning the family's current experience of transformation. Suransky (1982) notes that it is the nurturing process of the family that has been most impeded by recent societal developments.

A synthesis of insights related to historical observations on the family include the following: the family (in whatever form) has remained the basic socializing unit of society; the full development of individuals is linked to a harmonious "match" between family and community; there is an interactive relationship between family and community; there is an interactive relationship between family advancement and social progress; the emergence of the family as a proactive force in social living allowed for the development of childhood; and the emergence of childhood unleashed creative forces that have created totally new powers for possible human advancements (Salk, 1983).

Families: A Socio-Psychological Perspective

Socio-psychological insights on family dynamics provide a unique dimension to the understanding of how families (as individual members and as a group of interacting individuals) relate to life's challenges. All family change is filtered through the dynamics of the individual-group relationship. Through a series of dyadic, triadic, and indirect relationships, families are formed and continuously refined (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). The concept of modernity (which is premised on the strength of growing persons) is a by-product of fully functioning families and has prompted ideological positions that focus on the social and psychological nature of individual and family development. Within a life-span framework, individuals who benefit from a positive and nurturing family life progress through socio-psychological growth stages. In turn, these people provide the foundation for improving and refining family life in their adult endeavors. In the best of situations, families are a collection of individuals who function harmoniously; acting on change in positive modes and stimulating each other to develop in productive ways (Erikson, 1982).

A spiral of human growth and actualization in individuals and families has been recorded by social scientists (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Erikson, 1982; Montagu & Matson, 1979). The development of healthy socio-psychological traits in people, such as trust, security, autonomy, identity, and generativity are related to fully functioning families. In turn, healthy families appear to evolve from the efforts of trusting, secure, and progressive adults (Stinnett, 1979). While few families and/or individuals ever reach full actualization, the paradigm has served to focus on how families deal with change, how they can be supported in improving their lives, and how the role of families is integral in all aspects of development and learning (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

In exploring how individuals and families deal with change, socio-psychological perspectives provide a map that focuses on the following: individuals and families are growth-oriented systems that seek equilibrium through a harmonious change-stability process; individuals and families develop in sequential, progressive stages that ideally support more complex functioning; and individuals and families are interdependent in their actualization efforts (Schwartzman, 1985). In dealing with change, individuals in families are allocated (or more accurately allocate) roles that allow for accomplishing various tasks and yet free up family members to pursue growth opportunities in a productive manner. This process involves family members in a myriad of interactions that have the potential for promoting individuation while supporting the emergence and refinement of a family identity (Swick, 1987). Most families absorb and use natural developmental changes such as adolescence as opportunities for growth. Evidence suggests that families that utilize a growth-oriented posture in their lives usually have healthier relationships (Sigel, 1985). Realistically, most families struggle with these developmental events and experiences.

For whatever reasons (and there are many) when families lose their ability to deal with change, their socio-psychological orientation becomes rigid, defensive, and deficit oriented. Analyses of troubled families indicate they are usually in a "freeze" pattern; focusing energy totally on internal equilibrium issues and unable to relate to the dynamics of daily life. Without growth, there is only decline; a deterioration in family relationships, an emergence of individual psychosis, and an overall static family system that is metaphorically best symbolized by a closed, continuous feedback loop (Andolfi, Angelo, Menghi, and Nicolo-Carigliano, 1983). This closed system reduces each person's effectiveness and ultimately prohibits family and individual actualization (Swick, 1984).

A characteristic of dysfunctional families is their inability to deal with change; signifying a loss of control both in an ideological and pragmatic sense. While all families experience difficulties, troubled (and possibly pathological) families appear to be engaged in continuous disorder. In addition, dysfunctional families direct energy toward negative ends; blaming, defending, and protecting individual and family practices that serve only to continue the status quo. This dysfunctional orientation is the result of multiple influences including biological, environmental, and usually a mix of these sources (Schwartzman, 1985). For example, a family may experience several interrelated stressors: marital conflict, economic crisis, and difficulties at work. The overload of stress that results from these factors may trigger further problems which eventually send the family into a cycle of rigid, counterproductive behavior. Their system for dealing with change is, in a sense, overwhelmed and thus prohibits their normal problem-solving behavior from working.

Many families are finding it difficult to cope with the intensity and complexity of modern life. A common family experience is the existence of overload and the stretching of inadequate resources to meet excessive needs (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Healthy families (not perfect families) appear to access needed supports for meeting diverse needs or at least are skilled in recognizing their resource needs and planning to overcome them (Curran, 1985). It is not that healthy families never experience high stress; it is the way they use the environment and their skills in responding to stress effectively (Swick & Graves, 1986). Evidence supports the idea that when families project a progressive and optimistic view of life, they deal with change quite effectively (Sigel, 1985).

Families provide both the filter and the stimulus for making productive social change possible (Berger & Berger, 1983). On the one hand, families act as a mediating force between societal change and individual development. In this sense, divorce, abuse, and other family pathologies are signals that social systems are out of synch with the well being of human advancement. On the other hand, families are creative forces in that they, when fully actualizing, release tremendous positive energy through the accomplishments of individuals (Shoumatoff, 1985).

Perspectives on Current and Emerging Family Trends/Issues

Can the family remain a vital force in the socialization process and continue to function as a proactive influence on the future? This question, along with many related issues, is being explored in light of what is a major structural transformation among families (Berger & Berger, 1983). Certainly the family must continue to perform two highly important roles in relationship to societal functioning: it must be a stabilizing force for both individual and group identity to develop; and it must also be a force for change and innovation. Some of the issues being examined are reflected in the following questions.

1. How is the family influenced by major social change?

2. Why does the family appear to be changing so dramatically in regard to modern stress?

3. What characterizes effective families in terms of their interactions internally and with the community?

4. What roles can government and private agencies pursue to be most effective in helping families?

While the answers to these questions are many, there are emerging insights that deserve exploration. *A key insight is that families have a "working capacity" like any other human system.* Under extreme stress the capacity of many families is exceeded and the results are often seen in dysfunctional behaviors. Increments in child abuse, divorce, and related family issues have been linked to societal changes that have caused extreme stress: increased work demands and resulting role changes in families being just two such influences. While these changes are not negative events, the impact of such changes on families has proved stressful in many cases.

In relationship with these stressors, *families have responded by reshaping their structure and by redefining their roles; or at least by experimenting with these processes.* Consider some of the following changes that have taken place over the past twenty-five years:

- In 1940 27.4% of women were in the work force; in 1987 56.0% were in the work force.

- The divorce rate has doubled since 1965 and demographers project that half of all first marriages today will end in divorce.

- Sixty percent of all second marriages today are expected to end in divorce.

- One-third of children today will likely live in a step-family by the age of 18.

- One of every four children living to day is in poverty; the rate is twice as high for black and Hispanic children.

- While women are in the work force in unprecedented numbers, their "work" at home remains very high with little role changes yet to take place with men.

- Women and minorities make up the bulk of new entrants into the labor force; now and in the future.

- The American family continues its trend toward diversification; multiple structures and roles are continuing as we head into the next century (U.S. Census Bureau, 1990).

These changes in the family and in society reflect a major transformation process. In light of these changes, many families have regrouped to examine their values, structure, and way of operating. Recent studies show that the family is in the process of exploring various structures and modes of living to position itself for better relating to societal changes (Anderson & Carter, 1984; Rekers, 1985). Some of the family-society transactions being negotiated include: reshaping the family-workplace match; redefining marital and family roles; inventing new, more viable child care arrangements; reconstituting extended family systems through neighborhood, church, and school resources; and renewing and realigning family value systems that promote family involvement in constructive social change (Cheal, 1991). Ultimately, this negotiation process may (given proper support) strengthen families and the society.

As families are renegotiating their structures, roles, and functions, they are finding "unifying forces" that empower them to participate in life with meaning. These sources of empowerment appear to be centered in: the family's commitment to each other, spending time together as a family unit, the development of good communication, recognition of the value of every family member, an ongoing spiritual commitment, and the ability to deal with problems in a positive and constructive manner (Stinnett, 1982).

These "unifying forces" occur in families of various structures and divergent arrangements. They should serve as an initial point for supporting family efforts to cope with change. For example, government agencies and public policy makers can act to assure families the latitude needed for developing these skills and attributes. Advocacy efforts directed toward creating more viable maternity and paternity leave policies is one example of productive government involvement. Additional efforts (already under way) include shaping national child care policies and practices that reflect a commitment to quality, and programs that assure quality health and family care. While these policies are currently being studied (and in some cases implemented) the realities of severe poverty, homelessness, and societal stress are eroding the strength of many families.

Family support systems must take into account current and emerging trends in the way families are structured, challenges they are experiencing, and related stressors. Consider, as examples, the following data on the dramatic changes and complex issues many families face as we enter the 1990s.

One very dramatic change is the role of women in our society. In 1950 women made up only twenty percent of college undergraduates. Today they comprise fifty-four percent of undergraduate student bodies. A healthy event for society and family but a major change for the way marriages and families operate. Not only have roles changed but women's aspirations have also moved in new directions; their goals of achieving career status are quite distinct from more limited visions expressed in surveys in the 1950s. This change is reflected in the realities of dramatic increments in the number of women lawyers, women physicians, and women engineers (U.S. Census Bureau, 1987). And, if the emergence of women as local political activists is any indication, the society should see them in state and federal positions very soon. Their presence in elected office since 1950 has tripled (U.S. Census Bureau, 1990).

With the change of the woman's role in society came major changes in family structure and in the roles men and children play within the family-school-society triad. Or, it might be more accurate to say that changes would be needed if indeed the family could adapt to this new trend. Indeed the stressors experienced by many families relate to these changes. Interpersonal family stress, marital conflicts, parent-child strains, and many other family problems have been related to confusion and/or conflict over role and structural dissonance related to the more diverse roles played by women. Divorce, spouse abuse, and other family difficulties may well be the results of a major chasm between societal expectations for the family and the family's resources for meeting these unrealistic goals (Pence, 1988).

A result of the multiple family stresses and changes in family structure (divorce, remarriage, abuse) have brought about tremendous increases in the numbers of poor, single-parent families (Swick, 1987). Close to sixty percent of poor families in America are headed by single parents (U.S. Census Bureau, 1987). It is not uncommon for women to experience a seventy percent loss of income after divorce (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). The economic and emotional impact of divorce on the family and society has only recently been exposed. Ten years after divorce, women and children (as well as men) were still struggling with economic and/or emotional damage emanating from the divorce (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989).

Even families where both parents are involved have confronted serious challenges: finding quality child care, balancing family-work issues, maintaining an adequate standard of living, and nurturing the marriage and family relationship (Rekers, 1985). These challenges call for creative responses on the part of families and society. Some positive signs within the family include an emerging redistribution of intrafamily jobs, a sharing of roles, and a rethinking of ways to deal with the family's developmental needs (Galinsky, 1990). In effect, parents are learning to capitalize on new ways of responding to social change. Yet there is and will be a need for human support systems.

As human support systems, schools, child care programs, and other helping professions have a special role to carry out in support of families. This role includes at least three major functions: 1) educating parents about the nature of societal change and skills they can use in responding to such change; 2) supporting families through the creation of helping and advocacy strategies such as extended care programs and better health services; and 3) educating the community about the need for reshaping the family-society match so families can be a productive force in life. Examples of programs that are attempting to provide these types of support include:

- The Parents As Teachers (PAT) program currently provided in Missouri where parents have access to both educational and social supports beginning with the birth of the first child.

- The Child Development In Public Schools program now being offered in several states such as in South Carolina.

- The Act For Better Child Care is in a small way providing several supports: improved training for child care professionals, more access to quality child care for parents, and implementation of required health and safety standards for child care centers.

- The On-Site Child Care programs in business/industry that are now emerging offer a new possibility not only for more child care but for a closer match between family and work.

- The Family Leave Act recently signed by President Clinton offers real possibilities for parents with regard to better responding to the family's developmental needs.

The future of families is linked to the furthering of programs and practices such as those listed above. These practices promise at minimum a possibility of families exploring more creative ways of relating family development to the dramatic changes in society. Without creative services for families, the society places these families and itself "at risk." Social and technological advancements depend on the empowering of families to become proactive change agents.

Early Childhood Educators and Families

Historically, early childhood professionals have been an integral part of the family's development and learning. At the turn of this century, for example, Jane Addams organized social work and child care services for immigrant families. The field of pediatrics was formed in response to the unique needs of young children and their families. Parent education programs have been used throughout history to enable parents to respond to varying new situations. Parent-child centers, family counseling centers, and a variety of parent involvement efforts are additional examples of family support efforts. Since the 1930s several programs have been used to highlight the need for new ways of families and society relating together: depression year nurseries, the Kaiser Center, Head Start, and now several exemplary child and family service programs (Osborn, 1991; Schorr & Schorr, 1988). Indeed the invention of early childhood education as a profession was a societal response to the expanded role of the family. Given the challenges emerging in the 1990s, the role of the early childhood educator will expand and require even more in-depth training and education.

With the increase in the complexity of family and society needs came the need for more skilled support persons. In modern society, families find themselves in new situations that demand more time, skills, and resources. Yet they often find their personal and family resources are in short supply. The emergence of early childhood programs over the past thirty years have focused on supporting families in facing these changes. The emphases in these programs (at least those that have been somewhat successful) have been on two major themes: 1) increasing parental skills in controlling the change process; and 2) supporting the family with resources that enable them to carry out their roles.

Past and current research on families clearly points to parents as the leadership team of the family (Swick, 1987; Swick, 1989). Efforts to increase parental control skills as related to family development have taken many forms: parent education materials and resources, job skills and training, family management programs, seminars (on issues related to child care, for example), counseling resources, and many other projects. In all cases these programs and services have evolved from family needs. Some examples help to highlight this point. Selecting quality child care in the 1990s is challenging; what criteria should one look for? Dealing with the complexities of managing the family-workplace match often requires information and help. Other issues being raised by parents today include: What is really important for my child's healthy development? Where can I get help on becoming a better parent? These issues can be addressed by parent education programs. In addition, there are current and emerging family problems that need special educational attention: drug abuse, child and spouse abuse, teen-parenting, and family violence.

Early childhood professionals also have a significant support role; it begins with providing children and families with quality child care environments. It extends to offering services that support and nurture families through counseling, health care, social services, economic support, and educational assistance. The coordination and utilization of services is critical to the role of the early childhood professional.

Families that derive the benefits of early involvement in building skills and relationships that promote healthy family life are likely to continue this positive way of life. Early childhood educators can combine their educational and support roles to make a significant contribution to this very critical social process. Through continuous study of family needs, such as using historical and developmental perspectives, the early childhood professional can acquire a foundation for planning and implementing family-centered practices.

Chapter Three

DIMENSIONS OF FAMILY LEARNING

There is more to learning about families than simply understanding their context from the general perspective. Most of what is really important is learned within the family environment. Values, attitudes, and major living skills are acquired through involvement with the "intimate others" people usually define as family. While there are many dimensions of family life that can be observed in daily social interactions beyond the home, three major dimensions that account for most of what is learned during the early childhood years are: ritual, time, and space (Swick, 1987). An understanding of how families use these dimensions of learning as well as how they form and use rituals is helpful in developing a basis for a positive and meaningful relationship with them.

Unfortunately, many educators restrict their image of families to the traditional social variables such as income, level of education, and social status. While these variables are instructive of family status, they leave some of the most important cues of family learning to be unearthed. Family life is too complex to be reduced to any equation or system. Early childhood professionals need to be informed and sensitive to these dimensions of family learning and integrate them into their working relationships with parents and children.

Rituals

Families could not develop without rituals. The intergenerational nature of many family rituals is evidence of the family's need for continuing validation. Ritualization of time, behavior, and other events is essential to having a framework for initiating and maintaining family life (Howard, 1978; Stinnett, 1981). For example, in the formative stage of family life, parents use their ritual history as well as current cultural folklore to form a basis upon which to function. It is through rituals such as feeding, bathing, and loving that families form the needed bonds to meet their needs and to support the development of each person's individuality.

Some rituals are used throughout the intergenerational life cycle of families. Bowlby (1984), for example, points out that across cultures "birthing rituals" typically last for many generations. Other rituals may serve an immediate function and then be discarded. Rituals evolve from both conscious and unconscious actions. Acting as the binding force of the family, rituals provide the framework for carrying out safe and mutually meaningful interactions among the members.

The significance of rituals and the influence they have on family dynamics is seen in the early behaviors of expectant parents. They often spend considerable time rehearsing how they will parent, plan and ready a special room or place for the baby, and share with each other their doubts and hopes for the expected child. Later, they will refine their rituals to include a new time frame and daily schedule when the baby arrives. Throughout the family's life, parents generate (along with their children) rituals that enable them and their children to adapt and accommodate to the many changes that are inevitable. These ritualistic habits are essential to the family's development and wellness (Montagu & Matson, 1979; Swick, 1987).

Family rituals also provide members with ways to recognize each other's achievements. Graduations, promotions, birthdays, and other times of recognition are used to strengthen the pride family members take from individual accomplishments. These celebrations reinforce within each family member their importance to the group, providing the basis for the family's emerging identity. That is, each family takes on a unique identity which goes beyond cultural context and has great implications for those working with families. For example, a child may miss school to be in attendance at an important family function. Family rituals need to be understood by teachers so that they are a valued part of the family-school learning arrangement (Howard, 1978).

To celebrate "family" is to secure the well-being of loved ones, thus creating the needed social, emotional and spiritual family bonds (Hall, 1984). During the early childhood years, family rituals serve the special purpose of enabling parents and children to build trust and confidence in each other which is absolutely critical to their emerging selves and to their uniqueness as a family (Erikson, 1982). In effect, family rituals provide us with the elan of life. When schools, churches, and other community groups disrupt or devalue this part of family life, the fabric of our social structure is in trouble. Helping professionals like teachers of young children can support family ritual development by integrating this process into their classroom and school activities and thinking.

Time Usage

It is time that provides human beings with a measure of the space they inhabit (Hall, 1984). Time usage permeates all aspects of the family's relationships. There are various forms of time that families develop and use to create their own special identity: clock time, body time, formal-informal time, and family time. During the early childhood years, parents and children experience the complexities of time usage in a very intense way. For example, the mere fact that our society slots time influences the development of family life. At the most critical time in the formation of family (birth-three years of age) many parents are pressured to neglect family bonding because of economic and work stress. In other cases, societal emphasis on adult-centered activities has dulled the time orientation of parents so much that they unconsciously choose to neglect the parent-child relationship (Swick, 1987).

Parents and children need plenty of "informal time" to learn about each other and the special nuances that comprise their individual and family identities. As Hall (1984) observes, the American society allows little time for this important informal learning process to occur. The mentality that family life just happens and that parenting, child care, and family relationships are in fact a low social priority, is negatively influencing the way families function (Suransky, 1982). For example, parents of young children are often faced with the challenge of leaving a sick child in day care or losing a day's wages because society sees "work time" as more critical than caring for an ill child or spouse. A similar paradox exists in the mixed messages parents receive on the importance of being with their newborn. While folklore and social science research has it that parent-infant attachment is vital to family formation, few societal advances have been achieved regarding adequate maternity/paternity leave (Pogrebin, 1983; Swick, 1987). Tragically, the "time-crunch" today's families experience allows little time or opportunity for them to come to know each other as "family" (Swick, 1985).

Large doses of informal, high context time are needed during the formative period of parent-child relationships. Trust building, social competence, relationship formation, health care, and multiple other learning and development processes require the close and intimate attention of parents and children (Blazer, 1989). For example, at first observation, processes such as feeding and loving may seem simplistic; yet they require context building where parents and children have time and resources to nurture each other. This creation of a family context is the highest form of work known and many cultures recognize this process as the "parent's work" by accommodating their work lives. In these cultures time is not rigidly defined according to macrosystem rules but adapted to meet the needs of people (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

High context is critical and it exists where people have time to explore the many dimensions of their humanity. While it is difficult to quantify, high context is readily seen in situations where parents and children have a reservoir of social and emotional experiences that help them define who they are and what their roles are in the family and community (Hall, 1984; Swick, 1991). "Time" provides the means by which parents and children can form a meaningful environment. Within the time-framework that families function, many activities like meals, games, sharing rituals, picnics, work-tasks, and other events combine to become the substance of their context. It is how we learn about each other, our common needs and goals, and how to deal with various issues in the family and beyond in the larger society. Without continuous interactions, parents and children run the risk of developing a sense of insecurity, isolation, and inadequacy as related to human functioning (Montagu & Matson, 1979).

Space Usage

Space provides the shape and form with which we do something with time. ***It is what each of us visualizes as our place in the world.*** While we spend time in many places, beginning at birth we define these places into a "unified space" that serves to help us form our identity. It is in the *family context* where we learn about space; what it is, how it is used, and the various refinements that can occur within it. It is here (in the family) that we learn how to begin shaping our "space" as individuals and relating that space to our relationships with others (Blazer, 1989).

In learning how families use space, consider the three types of space that are integrated into the dynamics of family relationships: physical, psychological, and social. Of course, these dimensions of space are interactional and often are shaped by families to project their identity. Yet, assessments of how families use these different types of space provide many worthwhile insights on their beliefs and actions.

Touch is one of the key learning tools infants use in exploring the world. Thus, physical space takes on meaning at the very outset of life. Studies on parent-infant relationships indicate the close physical interactions that often emerge promote a healthy sharing of space and provide the foundation for extending this process to lifelong psychosocial domains (Erikson, 1982). Another observation made by family researchers is that parents who tend to share space with their children in warm and supportive relationships also spend more time with them in shaping an inviting context for family harmony (Stinnett, 1981, 1982). In contrast, parents who isolate themselves and rigidly allocate space to highly formalized contacts tend to communicate an authoritarian message to children. In many cases, this overly formalized orientation to space usage by parents is influenced by a "cultural paradigm" that subtly encourages it through inadequate work-family practices. Regardless, high context of a developmentally nurturing form is greatly needed if children and adults are to develop a secure and meaningful value orientation regarding their relationships (Hall, 1984; Swick, 1989).

The family's use of space in the home (where parents and children organize their individual and family places) is another extension of their identity. The way space is *filled* and how it is organized are symbolic of the family's system of functioning. Homes that are filled primarily with adult items send the message that children's needs and interests are either unimportant or not well understood. For example, when parents lack an understanding of children's developmental needs, they may select inappropriate things to fill the family's space. Clearly, a balanced adult-child physical ecology is most representative of a context where development and learning are understood as mutually essential and meaningful human processes (White, 1988).

Families that value all of their members make room for each other's physical artifacts and continually modify their space usage to accommodate each other's needs. Just as important is how space is allocated and shared. Rigid space usage, for example, may indicate that relationships are too confined and that little room is allowed for working through developmental changes that naturally occur in both children and parents (Fishel, 1991). Indeed one sign of unhealthy family contexts is where parents fail to adapt the space setting to the ever-changing dynamics of family growth and learning (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

Families that value their members make room for each other's artifacts and modify their usage to meet common and unique needs. Integral to the family's space needs is how space is allocated and controlled within the family context. Rigid space usage, for example, may indicate that relationships are too rigidly defined and that little room is allowed for working through developmental changes that naturally evolve in parent and child relationships (Gordon, 1977; Swick, 1987).

Flexible use of space (where family members feel at ease in sharing space and yet respecting "individual space") has been recognized as a characteristic of healthy group dynamics in various systems including the family (Ford &

Lerner, 1992; Stinnett, 1979). The dynamics inherent in family development require that space be used to meet the needs of individual members as well as allowing for family needs. Parents set the pace by initiating this space usage process and the "growth" of the family is certain to influence this process in various ways. The social competence desired by our cultural system can be seen in miniature form in the family where, hopefully, space is shared in a democratic and ecologically sensitive manner. For example, as children feel comfortable in entering "parent space" to inquire about family events and processes, they acquire a sense of full participation in the family building process (Fishel, 1991).

"Psychological space" can be defined as the space each family member identifies as theirs, their perceptions of that space, the space of others, and the overall space of the family's context. Erikson (1982) notes that trust building requires that the child and the parents sense their validity within the family arrangement. It is not enough to allow a child physical space alone; the need for being an important part of the family's psychological identity is inherent in our being. Each of us can recall being isolated from a particular relationship. The sudden feeling of not being a part of the "family's space" is frightening because it threatens our individual sense of being important to those we thought were an intimate part of our lives. To have psychological space in the family is to be included in the family's patterns and rituals, and to be allowed to maintain and refine one's sense of self (Rossi & Rossi, 1990).

The child's social involvement in the family allows for the strengthening of his or her psychological self. For example, while visiting friends at dinner some time back I observed how a four year old child wanted to "enter" the discussion that was in process. His father noticed it too and requested that all of us listen to John's ideas. John shared his thoughts and was accepted nicely by everyone. You could see that his sense of importance was reinforced and his respect for others was emerging as the evening progressed.

Social space is where we meet and share and contribute as family members. The child who is given jobs, and allowed to be a part of the group's decision-making process is sent a message that he or she is indeed needed and wanted. Exclusion from family rituals and isolation from other social arrangements is certain to impede everyone's growth.

While space usage is never a totally coherent process, the planning of space is essential to creating a viable family learning system. Failure to plan space usage can lead to inappropriate use of the home environment by parents and children. Piaget (1954) notes that in order to learn we must be actively involved in the environment. Active space usage versus passive space usage is an issue that must be addressed within the family's learning arrangement.

The study of how families use space is instructive with regard to children's behavior and learning in other contexts. Families where communication, reading, playing, field-tripping, sharing, and planning are natural activities will have an *active space usage* orientation. Passive space usage is characterized as predominantly receptive, inactive, and isolated. Excessive television viewing, little dialogue, and few family rituals are typical of this syndrome.

How we use time and space are the keys to what type of context we develop in our family relationships (Hall, 1984). Howard (1978) explains that "healthy families" use time and space to build a context that includes the following: leadership in the form of capable parent/adults; a person(s) who monitors the family's wellness (often a parent or other significant adult); togetherness that allows for individuality and yet values group contributions; hospitality in the sense of accommodating each other's needs as well as adopting friends as honorary family members; problem solving with a sense of realism and compassion; meaningful rituals that serve to bond people together; affection for each other on a continuing basis; a sense of pride in the family; and a sense of *history* about the family.

How is one to develop the context for nurturing *family identity* if there is no time nor adequate space in which to build the foundation. It is in the continuing, intimate relationships of family that respect, sharing, teaming, affection, identity, and meaning are developed. The current direction of limiting parents' time and space to influence these family growth processes is having a negative influence on parents, children, and the society. *Family space must include the poetic and affectional relationship experiences* that nurture the individuals and the family toward a more sensitive and lasting meaning. While this family development process (which includes thousands of person-hours) may seem inefficient and complex, it is absolutely essential to having healthy communities (Salk, 1983).

The invasion of the family's needed time and space resources is and will continue to have a powerfully negative impact on our society. One influence of the current social trend of adults and children spending less time together is what Suransky (1982) calls the *erosion of childhood*. Within our very rigidly defined concepts of social success, economic and societal needs have taken priority over those of the family. By reducing our human relationships to nicely wrapped *quality time blocks* it has become difficult for people to truly understand what Bronfenbrenner (1979) meant when he cautioned that children need at least one adult in this world who is irrationally in love with them.

Irrational space makes room for baby and dad to roll on the floor, for mommy, daddy, and baby to disappear for a few days, and for families to spend hours in the kitchen ***talking, crying, laughing, and planning*** like a group of people who are crazy about each other. In our current cultural space and time framework, these are considered illegitimate uses of our lives.

Legitimacy is given to what our culture considers high-outcome tasks such as work, study and career planning. The consequences of this limited and one dimensional outlook are many. For example, less time is spent in parent-child relationships. Family stress is increased due to overload and work/family conflicts. Family problems such as child abuse have increased (how can we solve problems together if we do not know each other), and thus in many cases families have a sense of meaninglessness regarding their relationships. (Curran, 1985).

The following facts present an accurate and threatening picture of the family's wellness status:

- Parents spend less time with their children today than they did prior to the 1950s (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Swick, 1987).

- Children spend more time watching television, in day care, and/or with other children than they do with their parents (Pogrebin, 1983).

- Intergenerational space and time contacts for people have been reduced through age segregation in housing, work, education, and other social contexts (Hall, 1984; Popenoe, 1988).

As early childhood educators, we must reconstruct our perceptions of how space and time is used. We must give priority to children and parents using space and time to develop a healthy foundation for lifelong learning and enjoyment. It is also critical that we see family-time as a part of our programs and activities; nurturing parent-child play and supporting parent-child habits that focus on relationship building. Finally, it is urgent that an intergenerational context be promoted with regard to the development of families.

Artifacts as Family Identity

Every family uses time and space to generate experiences that become the signs and symbols of their identity. Throughout the family's journey these artifacts become historical markers for referencing many individual and family identity experiences. They come to make up our memories of what it is to be a family. Artifacts provide us with a means by which our individual and group identities can be enriched and sustained. By no means are these artifacts simply nostalgic recall on our part, rather they include the many struggles and challenges each family member recalls and lives. Photo albums, bibles, diaries, special household items, musical instruments, grade cards, awards, and many particular events take on meaning because they emerged during the family's journey. These family items provide both immediate validation of our common mission and act as historical markers for supporting the family as it experiences change (Fishel, 1991).

More important than the physical artifacts are the psycho-social markings created within the family's life-space. The *mental and emotional histories* that we develop and internalize from family life and then bring to our broader social relationships produce what might be called the evolution of culture. Caring, respect, humane values, and many other parts of our self-perceptions are influenced by the psychological and spiritual artifacts that emerge from family relationships (Fowler, 1989). *No meaningful teaching or nurturing can take place without an understanding of each child's family culture; the artifacts—both physical and mental—that comprise that child's psycho-social and spiritual being.*

The memories created in families, whether bad or good, create in each of us a learning orientation toward life. Consider, for example, the young child that has developed a "scheme" of the world as an inviting place; a context that welcomes exploration and values the child's natural capacities. This child has built a map or a pattern of memories that reinforce a healthy view of self and an image that encourages active involvement in the environment (Erikson, 1982).

Psychological and spiritual artifacts include a great variety of family actions and it is in the pattern and process of artifact building (not the isolated artifacts) through which life's meaning is constructed by children and parents. These images of relating to self and others seem to occur through the building up of *continuing interchanges* of verbal and nonverbal events and actions of family members. A few examples help to clarify how this process works.

> John and his mother have always been close. When he was *little* she would hold him while she read the evening paper at the kitchen table. Now they talk a great deal about what they read and keep in touch regularly even though John lives several hundred miles from home.
>
> Early in the Williams' family life they became big picnic people. We've always thrived on picnics. Our oldest son drives 80 miles one way each month to be here; he wouldn't miss them. It's not just the food, it is the feelings we have for each other.
>
> I guess we are like a poem that gradually takes hold of you. We are not loud, not really very physical, not overly expressive, but we are *close*. It is hard to explain, it's just us. Each person is really strong and very independent, yet very connected.

Different *family markings* bring special meaning to each person and in a very concrete sense influence the way the next generation will see themselves and others. Time and space are essential to the artifact building process. It is the physical and psychological artifacts and the process used to create them that makes up our personal and social context. It is *context* that children draw from as they extend their reach toward involvement in day care, school, and the community. It is *context* that parents use to form their views of parenting and to explore their social world of work and adult interactions. Without context, a person is not a person, but rather an object that is simply batted around like a ping pong ball. Personality implies the existence of something special; some human process that is beyond quantification; some special traits that if they were lost would detract from what we could become (Hall, 1984).

The many tasks that parents perform in order to establish an environment where family artifacts can become a reality require the time, space, and resources that can only come from supportive others. Early childhood educators have a real opportunity to be a part of the family's support team. A beginning point in this process is to better understand the family's cultural and social context. In working with parents and children, early childhood professionals need to include in their thinking issues such as the following:

1. What is the *family context* of the children? Do I value this context and have I integrated it into the curriculum?

2. Are our families taking the time to build strong family contexts? What can we do to promote healthier family relationships in the community?

3. What observable features of family-school efforts exist to create a better environment for children to explore their cultural identity?

4. Are we in touch with the way families use time and space in their lives? How have we achieved this?

5. Do our perceptions of children and families include their ideas and feelings about what is important? How have we incorporated the priorities of families into the program?

The building of family identity is everyone's concern. Through parent and citizen education we must involve everyone in examining how our society can better support families. It is within the family that *cultures* receive new ideas and the energy for improving the lives of citizens. The way families live is critical to the very fabric of every aspect of society.

The Family and the Early Childhood Educator

While early childhood professionals have always recognized the importance of families, in recent decades this recognition has taken on a new perspective. It is now clear that early childhood educators must sensitize themselves to the family learning process, how it occurs, and how it can be fully supported. As Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Curran (1985) have noted, family learning occurs as the members act to create a context where individual and group functions can be pursued in a secure and harmonious manner. While parents and children seemingly carry out this process in an effortless way, there are many hidden but significant things that must be nurtured. Unlike factories, families need time, space, and resources to create intimacy and spiritual values. Much of this needed support is used by families as they shape their relationship system; the structure by which they become healthy persons and contributing members of the society.

One very powerful way early childhood professionals can support families in their journey is through the development of strong relationships with them. This involves the planning of all program elements with *family* as the center of our thinking. Family learning style becomes a key ingredient in our thinking. What families do with time and space are examined for their value to school program designs. What parents do and think become as important as any other variables in the learning setting.

As parents are viewed as partners in the early childhood design, their views on a variety of issues are sought. What parents do in the home: how they use time, their perceptions and use of home learning space, and how they see their relationship with their children are important to the broadening of the early childhood paradigm (Comer, 1991; Gordon, 1977). This recognition of the critical need for parent involvement means that teachers spend as much effort at communicating with parents as they do with children. It means that parents and professionals plan together and solve problems together in ways that provide children with positive adult models (Swick, 1984).

Through observation, discussion, and teaming, parents and teachers can use the dimensions of family learning as a foundation for building a productive school program. For example, all parents have talents to contribute to the curriculum, thus strengthening the meaning of the children's learning experiences. Family values, rituals, and important events should be integrated into the curriculum in a manner that both validates the family's culture and broadens the family's understanding of their part in the learning process.

An early childhood program based upon parent-teacher teaming can serve to strengthen the entire community. Through a partnership model, teachers and parents can provide the community with an example of how to develop more humane ways of living. The beginning of tomorrow takes shape in the way children learn today.

Chapter Four

HOW THE FAMILY LEARNING PROCESS WORKS

The development of families is the result of many mindful choices that take place within the family's relationship system (Howard, 1978). The process of family learning is influenced by the behaviors individuals use in forming and refining their relationships. Healthy family development requires the use of proactive and reflective skills that enable family members to arrive at a sense of importance within the group. Research indicates that children and adults who are a part of healthy families perform better in their respective roles and appear to have more positive life views than people from dysfunctional family environments (Stinnett, 1980, Swick, 1987).

Unhealthy families tend to allow their actions to follow a mindless course. Their relationships often lack planning, reflect inadequate communication, and appear to lack social meaning. In some cases these actions are symbolic of major problems with one or more family members. In other cases it may be symptomatic of a major shock the family is experiencing. Whatever the predicament, family functioning is impeded (Schwartzman, 1985).

Central to a progressive, growing family is the emergence of productive human relationships. In order for these relationships to develop, a family learning system that is viable must exist. This system must be flexible and open so that individual and group needs can be served. At its best, the family's learning system uses the continuing *feedback* provided through human interaction to construct mindful responses to events and experiences generated in family living (Klein, 1985). It is through the uses of the *feedback process* that families can learn how to create healthy relationships.

The Content and Process of Family Learning

Feedback is input received from the environment as a result of some action taken by the individual or group. It serves as a message regarding the utility of some action or event. This message contains *content* that is used to assess the value of specific actions or ideas. Every meaningful human endeavor is based on the effective use of feedback. Feedback can be used, ignored, stored for later use, or placed in the context of other feedback for use in generating long-range plans (Glasser, 1984).

As Salk (1983) points out, human progress is built upon the use of this feedback construct. Society's effective functioning depends on families who have developed a learning system that includes a *process* by which feedback is integrated into their relationship system. In effect, the intentional, sophisticated uses of feedback as *content and process* dimensions of learning should be pursued as major social and educational goals.

On the surface, the idea of using feedback as a learning tool seems simple. Human behavior, however, is influenced by many factors and reflective thinking is only one option. To become skilled in using feedback as content and process for learning, one must be able to identify signals from their environment, analyze these signals' meaning, and integrate the substance of the meaning into some plan of action that can eventually lead to human improvement. One example of how this process works is seen in the following:

> Bill, who is in second grade, spends about six hours a day watching television. His school performance is poor and reflective of his very passive life style. Both his parents and his teacher have helped Bill see that he needs to change his habits. Indeed his mother has tried everything to limit his television time. But Bill is very creative and has avoided his mother's requests for change. His school troubles continue to increase and Bill is becoming more of a viewer than a participator in life.

Bill elected to ignore the feedback he received on his behavior, which has contributed to even more problems in his life. His situation helps to highlight some of the real issues involved in family learning. Most people need help in dealing with feedback; family learning is indeed a growth process where everyone needs to be sensitive to the needs of others. People are also in need of some visible way to change their behavior. Bill's mother, for example, might establish a family viewing time and set up regular home work times. Children in particular need guidance and continuing support in order to see how feedback can be used to better their situation.

How Healthy Families Learn

Family perfection is never achieved and probably not desirable. Yet positive family relationships provide the foundation for having healthy societies. Stinnett (1980, 1981) has provided us with a picture of how healthy families learn, but cautions that each family is unique in their identity and in their approach to living. Three observations that he makes regarding family learning are: families use many different ways to learn, they all use feedback from the environment as a continuing way of adapting to life, and they are spiritually committed to each other. While healthy families may differ in their approach, they all are skilled in using the environment as a source of learning.

There are several ways that families use feedback to strengthen their individual and group identity. Yet the common element in healthy families is their allegiance to a progressive belief system. They take a positive approach to life: sharing, using constructive problem solving, being sensitive to each other's needs, and viewing life optimistically and yet realistically too. In effect, in these families, feedback is seen as a way of meeting the essential needs of harmony, security, and love (Swick, 1987).

A part of this orientation is the critical notion that one can influence events that are a part of the family's environment. Schaefer (1983, 1991) has noted that children of proactive parents held similar perspectives as their parents held and that this *sense of control* was observed in various family interactions. In work with parents of "at risk" children, this same observation has been noted, namely that high control oriented parents seem to more quickly and more effectively get involved in helping their children (Swick, 1992).

Effective families are not caught up in a web of constantly reacting to feedback in highly emotive and chaotic ways. Stinnett (1979) noted that productive family life is characterized by a great deal of planning. Parents have usually established this anticipatory style early in the family's life and integrated it into the fabric of the family's relationship style. He notes that it is a naturalistic planning process, where family members are empathetic to others, as seen in their actions. It is not a rigid scheme but rather a flexible and proactive approach to living.

Healthy families tend to anticipate what kinds of feedback different actions might instigate; that is, they ask the question *What if . . . ?* This enables them to visualize various scenarios with regard to different actions. At the informal level, healthy families seem to *play with choice-making* through their dialogue, sharing of interests, and articulation of concerns. At a more formal level they use rituals such as planning budgets, discussing weekly schedules, and sharing household tasks. In this way families build a problem-solving orientation for use in anticipating situations as well as creating many preventive and/or enriching modes of living. This creative approach to life enables families to grasp a more positive relationship with each other and in their personal lives (Schwartzman, 1985).

How do families learn to use feedback as a means for promoting each other's growth? Active, reflective involvement in the environment is one attribute of the learning family. Parents set the stage through their community interactions, acquiring the confidence and the support essential to carry over this proactive style to the family. In other words, families that have linkages to the world around them typically acquire not only resources for strengthening the family but also acquire a cognitive map for problem solving.

In order for families to function in viable ways they need to have positive relationships. The family's learning style is established within the dynamics of the relationship process. Healthy families develop open and yet predictable patterns of relationships that nurture their individual development as well as their group identity. This process begins within the marital relationship system (or in the case of single parents, the friendship system) and is extended and refined with the birth of the child. Parent-child attachment and family bonding are critical beginning points in the family's development of a learning system. The supportive rituals of sharing, planning, helping, and caring are first established within the attachment and bonding activities of the family during the first year of life. A style of learning how to learn from each other in productive ways is the most critical thing that happens during the nesting stage of life (White, 1988).

While it is natural for family members to attempt to influence each other, healthy families do so in a manner that is respectful of the individual and group needs present in their lives. Schaefer (1983) noted that parents who had the most positive influence on children were those who guided but did not rigidly structure the child's activities. In families where this form of empathetic guidance exists, people tend to offer each other suggestions, listen to different viewpoints, and help others accommodate the changes and challenges that naturally occur with growth and development. This process of sharing control is acquired with experiences where family members learn about each other and how to support each other.

How Families Learn From Each Other

For families to reach their full potential they must be able to learn from each other within their relationship system. Intrafamily feedback is the process that families use in this learning. Families, like all social systems, are continually challenged by the equilibrium/disequilibrium process that accompanies all human interactions (Schwartzman, 1985). For example, even minor stressors such as a parent-child conflict can cause adjustments in the relationships of others. Early in the family's development, parents need to construct a viable feedback pattern. Such a pattern is based on communication behaviors that encourage family members to recognize each other's signals (verbal and nonverbal behaviors) and to act on them in sensitive ways (LaRossa, 1986).

Thus, it is within their dyadic and triadic relationships that families learn how to learn from each other. Internal family feedback patterns can be clustered around parent-parent, parent-child, child-child, parent-other, and child-other relationships. Naturally these dyads are connected and stimulate the formation of triadic patterns as well as prompting many *indirect influences* on the behavior of family members. During the family's formative experiences, parents function as the controlling influence in this process (Bigner, 1985).

Parents establish a role model for the family's learning style through their relationship patterns; particularly with regard to how they use each other's feedback. *Parent-parent* (or parent-friend in the case of single parents) feedback patterns are based on several influences: their beliefs about each other, individual self-esteem, style of communication, problem solving skills, and related socioemotional and affective elements of their relationship (Curran, 1985). Parental relationships that are characterized by intimacy, trust, shared responsibilities, effective problem solving, flexibility of roles, strong and enduring emotional bonds, and a teaming philosophy have a powerful influence on the development of healthy family living (Cowan & Cowan, 1992). The communication process, as carried out in the parent-parent relationship, sets the framework for the family's feedback arrangement. Skills that comprise this relationship-building process include listening, responding, anticipating, assessing, and planning. One example of how this feedback process works within the parent-parent relationship is presented as follows.

> Don has been so busy selling insurance he was neglecting to become a full partner in nurturing the new baby. His wife had sent him *several signals* that she was very bothered by his lack of interest and his isolation from their new family member. Don had noticed his wife's displeasure but had not really taken notice of her deep concern. After a major argument he sat down and began to think through some of the changes he needed to make in his work schedule.

Don's situation is one that occurs in most families during the formative stage. Fortunately he was able to finally realize the message his wife had been sending and begin to make adjustments in his relationship with the family. Don used the skills that make for healthy relationships, and whether he realized it or not, he was also establishing a relationship pattern that would influence the entire family over the life span. Not all marital relationship patterns are as functional. Unreal expectations, poor communication, role rigidity, and inadequate planning are some factors cited by couples as barriers to having positive and healthy interactions (Bigner, 1985).

Parent-child relationship patterns also influence the learning process of the family. *Parent-child feedback patterns* begin with parental expectations about the nature of their expected child. What is expected of a newborn establishes, at least partially, an anticipated pattern of new relationships—for the entire family. Galinsky (1987) calls this the *image-making stage of parenthood*. The actual arrival of the newborn brings many refinements in parental expectations and prompts the development of the most powerful human relationship known to humanity. Consider, for example, the mother who establishes a warm, intimate relationship with the infant, and in turn, receives a sense of confidence from this trust-building process. Such a beginning is certain to lay the foundation for a healthy parent-child relationship. A proactive family learning process that is supported by a mutual trust can emerge from such positive beginnings (Erikson, 1959; 1982).

In parent-child relationships where distrust prevails, learning patterns are distorted and often lead to socioemotional problems. In such relationships feedback is misconstrued or ignored to the detriment of everyone. The parent who never establishes consistent and positive relationships with the child is certain to have difficulty relating to the child's behavior. Viable parent-child feedback arrangements are based on a context where mutually supportive interactions have been established. When parents and children communicate with each other regularly in responsive ways, they perceive feedback as a valuable part of their growth. Carol Ryan's recognition of a mood change in her son John is an example of how this feedback process might work to the family's benefit.

> John, you don't seem to be your usual happy self.
>
> That's 'cause Eddy has been pushing me and hitting me all the time at school.
>
> Mrs. Ryan calls John's teacher and initiates efforts to solve the problem.

Mrs. Ryan was able to carry out this problem-solving because she had built a repertoire of meaningful interactions with Bill. She knew what his usual behavior was like and was cognizant of changes that were taking place. Notice that she also felt comfortable in asking Bill about his feelings and trusted in his judgment about the problem at school. All of these elements combine to make up a healthy relationship pattern between parent and child. The beginning of lifelong family relationship patterns that promote growth is in the parent-parent and parent-child contexts (Stinnett, 1979).

In families where other adults (relatives, grandparents, or friends) are present, additional feedback sources exist. Depending upon the situation, extended family may strengthen or impede the family's development. For example, in families where the roles and relationships are clear and yet flexible, extended family can enrich and broaden the learning process. A grandparent may take on many roles, such as being a source of wisdom for parents and children, sharing household roles, bringing real history alive for the entire family, and many other dimensions. An alcoholic aunt or cousin, on the other hand, may actually disrupt family communication and absorb energy that otherwise might be focused on family issues. It is the *context created by the family* that establishes the meaning of their relationships. Naturally, this is an interactive process with relationships setting the stage for context and context influencing how relationships grow (Scott, 1985).

Single parents face a unique situation in that their feedback arrangement is often limited or skewed toward particular emphases. This is not necessarily an impediment, it simply sets up a different context in which relationship patterns are formed. For example, the teen-parent who is living in their family of origin, can actually benefit from the additional sources of support if the relationship system is oriented toward positive and proactive outcomes. As Bronfenbrenner (1979) points out ***it is not the number of available adult helpers that parents have access to, but the quality of the relationships they have with these helpers.*** The traditional stereotype that single-parents have less effective relationships with their children is *not supported by research.* Hetherington (1979) and Pence (1988) both observe that many single parents *adopt friends to strengthen their relationship system.* Others simply reorganize their lives to increase the time focus they can develop with their children.

Regardless of family style, several elements influence the family's learning system: physical and socioemotional factors; the role arrangements that prevail in the family (and how the family sees these arrangements); the developmental status of the family; and the human relationship skills family members use in their many interactions (Schwartzman, 1985).

Effective family learning depends upon a context where trust and psychological acceptance are prevalent in the relationship system. Stinnett (1979, 1982) notes that rituals where family members recognize each other's gifts, regular communication between parents and children, and the use of teaming in the solving of problems are indicative of a high trust climate. He also observes that the flexibility of roles among the key family leaders—the parents—is critical. In contexts where parents exchange roles, share in deciding how to handle family tasks, and share jointly in the refining of family rituals, family relationships are more fluid and proactive. Rigidity in role assignments usually constricts the communication process, distorting the feedback system and limiting the potential for family members to see each other's perspectives. Rigidly defined family relationships tend to become static (not responsive to the growth challenges all families face) and can lead to serious problems (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

As the family develops, its learning approach must be able to adapt to change; allowing for each member to differentiate within the relationship system. The key to handling change and assimilating the many new emphases of family members into the system is the role modeling set by parents. Their guidance, flexibility, and responsiveness to the changing needs of the family establishes a pattern that heavily influences the children.

Ultimately, the family's system is connected to other social systems like the church and the school. Without interactions with other systems, the family could not grow. Indeed one sign of a healthy family is their ability to utilize feedback and learning in relation to other social systems.

How Families Learn From Others

The isolated family is certain to suffer from social deprivation and eventually experience deterioration. While a complex and challenging process, families must be a functional part of the total social system (Swick, 1985). As noted by several ecological/systems thinkers (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Ford & Lerner, 1992; Garbarino, 1982; Pence, 1988), the family is not just a collection of individuals, rather it is comprised of various combinations of individual, internal, and external relationships. In other words, the events that happen to people in school, at work, and in their various relationships act as an influence on everyone in the family regardless of who is the receiver (Anderson & Carter, 1984). The family's skill in bringing about positive relationships with the community is directly related to the health of its members. In the positive sense, the community can be a source of strength for the family, enabling it to firm up its bonds and extend its reach through new learning opportunities. In a more problematic sense, the realities of injustice, family insensitivity, and living in a complex society present many stressors (Stinnett, 1979; Suransky, 1982).

Family-community studies indicate that the manner in which parents and children respond to and interrelate with the school, church, workplace, and other places and people influence what happens within their immediate setting. These studies also indicate that when family needs and talents are in balance with societal resources and supports, the results are positive (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Blazer, 1989; Comer, 1991; Pence, 1988). The family and the *systems of the community* are interlocking networks of human development and learning; providing each other with continuing feedback. Clearly the dynamics of this interactive process are complex; especially when all of these systems are changing rapidly and attempting to process this feedback in ways that present new challenges.

As Bronfenbrenner (1979) explains, children and families need the positive connections with the environment in order to pursue growth-oriented lifestyles. Positive relationships with the environment provide family members with sustenance for strengthening their internal relationships and also enable them to pursue an ever-widening circle of identity. Thus, whatever happens in the community has a pervasive influence on the family, and family developments ripple through the community in observable ways (Anderson & Carter, 1984).

In the workplace, for example, the personal situations of parents influence their job performance. Studies on worker productivity indicate that the mental health and personal attributes of people influence their functioning. Alcoholism, poor health, family problems, and other personal stress can have a negative influence on the individual's performance at work and at home. Unsafe conditions, inflexible contexts, and negative supervisory behavior are just some examples of possible negative stressors. These influence how parents see themselves and their children (Kamerman & Hayes, 1982).

Ideally, the family-workplace relationship would be one where both systems share and support in their mutual development in a way that strengthens the total community. Indeed, Stinnett (1981) noted that healthy families attempt to *balance the work and family process* to the benefit of the family and the community. These families attempt to develop a harmonious system which enables them to act productively in their various environments. In the same perspective, these families seem to have supportive work ecologies; places that respect their family and indeed support it. For most families, the balance of family and work are continuing processes that call for a learning attitude. Excessive family-work stress can erode parental and family wellness.

Chronic stress damages families. When the family's identity is threatened, the ability of its members to function productively is decreased. This is particularly so with young families. Parents of young children indicate that work stress can cut off the needed time for family intimacy. Excessive work demands, constant job insecurity, persistent unemployment, and poor work relationships are often noted by parents and children as destructive of family life (Pence, 1988).

Just as family relationships can provide its members with security and a positive learning climate, *the community must protect families from dissolution by providing essential supports*. For example, parents of young children who have access to some form of quality child care report fewer difficulties in handling their work and community responsibilities. In a very real sense, child care can act as a source of relief for parents, freeing them up to carry out their many different roles. Positive neighborhood relationships also contribute to family wellness. Such relationships offer children socialization avenues, provide parents with an informal support structure, and encourage the building of community identity (Pence, 1988).

External feedback is clearly the family's primary learning medium. It is known that isolated systems deteriorate without feedback. With the decline of the extended family the use of neighborhood sources for expanding family learning becomes even more crucial. Many single parents report that their primary source of support is from social relationships that emanate from the *neighborhood*. In this sense, neighborhood refers to the person's psychological and social network (this includes many possibilities—friends, relatives, church members, workplace friends, child care workers). Beyond the very important value of simply having a friend, these sources of support provide parents with many informational and family-building resources (Brown & Swick, 1979; Powell, 1989).

In the absence of an effective relationship with the community, families tend to lose a major source of energy renewal and often fall prey to the dangers of system burnout (Schwartzman, 1985; Boss, 1988). Families that have viable relationships with their various systems tend to carry out their daily lives in relative synchrony. They appear to use feedback as a means of enriching each other. Work and school become sources of strength and are used as family-building resources (Swick, 1987).

In relating to the world beyond the home, effective families seem to have internalized the following: they organize and use *feedback sources* such as friends, relatives, teachers, pastors, and others; they investigate the environment thoroughly (looking for the best resources possible); and they continually study and refine their relationships in other human systems (Curran, 1985). Likewise, progressive communities seek out ways to improve their support of families.

It is through contact with people in diverse settings that parents and children are able to develop human competence. All of the different members of the community carry out parenting roles through their support of every family member.

Creating a Viable Family Learning System

Reaching a workable level of synchrony among the many systems that comprise family living is a continuous and growing process. The balance sometimes is in favor of the family, but far too often it is distorted toward societal wishes. When parents have a positive internal family relationship pattern along with adequate resources to guide this process, the well-being of the family is usually sound. In cases where this harmony is threatened, family problems can become crises (Swick, 1987).

Healthy families use their skills and resources to develop a system for handling the equilibrium-disequilibrium process. They take feedback from all sources and attempt to integrate these responses into their family growth. No individual or family is able to reach an ideal level of synchrony. The process is dynamic and change is constant with families; both developmentally and ecologically. Yet healthy families reach for a proactive and sustaining relationship with each other and their environment. A good example of this process is the parent who combines their interest in sports with their involvement within the family. Another example is the young mother who organizes a small child care program to meet her child's socialization needs, the needs of neighbors, and her family's economic needs. Families continually strive to reach a balance among the various forces that influence them.

In this search for harmony and growth, families use their *perceptual orientation toward life*. In a collective sense families develop a self-image that reflects their history of relating to each other and their environment. Families that have experienced success in proactive living are usually adept at creating an integrated learning system. In other cases, where family-community stress is chronic, this learning process is impeded. Parents and children need the mental perspectives that nurture a positive and healthy relationship with life (Swick, 1985).

Two constructs are integral to the development of this positive mental perspective in families: *organization* and *control.*

Organization implies the existence of a system or arrangement by which people conduct their lives. White & Kaban (1979) found that effective parents of infants and toddlers had a clear but flexible organizational scheme that aided them in building a solid foundation for family functioning.

Organization within healthy families is very dynamic; broad guidelines are used so that individuals have room to grow and develop. Rigidly defined boundaries may work for a while but they do not serve the long term interests of families. Families need a fluid arrangement so they can recognize, act on, and integrate their experiences in meaningful ways. Typical examples of this fluid arrangement include the signals family members give each other such as leaving notes, keeping in touch, and changing work schedules (Swick, 1984).

Within dynamic systems like families, control is essential to having useful relationships. Mindless decision making will eventually erode family integrity and destroy the linkages needed for orderly living (Langer, 1983). Healthy families exude a compassionate control that enables them to realize meaning in life. For example, Schaefer (1983) observed that progressive parents were optimistic and proactive in their involvement in all facets of family life. Through sensitive and supportive actions families can relate to the environment is highly productive ways.

In summary, the critical elements to family learning include positive self-esteem, access to resources for carrying out family and community roles, use of problem solving skills, and a proactive view of life.

Family Messages: Building Community

Community is only possible through the many actions of families. Families are aware of this natural bonding between them and the community and offer many *signals that enable the community to grow.* This process occurs throughout the life span and is ultimately linked to social wellness.

At the community level, for example, families have been signaling society that the context for family wellness is in trouble. Rising divorce rates, increases in mental health problems, and parent burnout are not symptoms of uncaring families but rather indicative of a weak and eroding family-society match (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Families appear to be saying that something is seriously wrong in the value given to family life. Their signals are that the family's support system is badly eroded.

Some of these signals are clear: family time has been reduced, external demands have been increased, parent-child roles and relationships have been altered without adaptations in the larger social support structure, and the life-span network for nurturing families is in disarray. In effect, parents and children seem to be saying to the society that the very foundation for building community is decaying (Galinsky, 1990).

How are families delivering this message that serious dissonance exists? They are doing so through behaviors such as family violence, marital separation, child neglect, poor work and school attendance, and other actions. In the proactive sense, parents are teaming to advocate for more and better family support resources such as quality child care, flex-time at work, and family leave time to care for ill family. This infusion of family feedback into the social system is essential to creating a more viable community.

In their interactions with child care programs, neighbors, churches, work environments, and schools, families provide feedback of their status. A major responsibility of family support groups is to be sensitive to family signals. For example, teachers and social workers who have regular contact with family members are likely to develop insights into their feedback behavior. In some cases this feedback will come directly from parents in constructive requests for help. In other situations, families will only provide cues through their erratic behavior. This is especially the case when a family is under heavy stress.

Four family behavior patterns that are indicative of serious problems are: *isolation, defensiveness, aggression, and passiveness.* While every family exhibits these behaviors sometimes, it is the prevalence of a continuing pattern that begins to form a syndrome that should signal family support people to study the situation closer (Garbarino, 1982). For example, a family under temporary stress may withdraw from particular community activities as a way of regaining control of their lives. What is dangerous is when the family turns inside itself almost totally and is unable to find or to develop the internal equilibrium to interrelate with their environment in any functional way. In describing violent families, Gelles and Cornell (1985) note that such families are usually psychologically and physically isolated from their immediate surroundings. Studies on the functioning of human systems indicate that *any system (especially the family) that remains isolated from* *other systems will self-destruct* (Anderson & Carter, 1984; Schwartzman, 1985; Swick, 1991).

Families that are constantly on the defensive, reacting negatively to even the simplest of problems, are usually signaling for help. A *defensive reaction syndrome* is typically characterized by constant lateness, extreme absenteeism, severe difficulty with task completion, chaotic and inconsistent behavior, and a "blame it on life" syndrome (Swick, 1985). Family-helping groups need to be sensitive to this syndrome of mindless action as it is usually another call for help.

Aggression and passivity are also behaviors often exhibited by families signaling for help. These syndromes are often prevalent in family actions within and beyond their boundaries. In other words, the behavior becomes so prevalent it becomes accepted as the norm by everyone in the family and they are shocked when an outsider challenges their style. Sensitive helping behaviors can provide families with another perspective, one that is more proactive and healthy.

Just as multiproblem families give us signals so do healthy families. We need to be sensitive and supportive of what healthy families tell us about their needs too! For example, parents may take special measures to help out at the child care center, indicating their positive involvement with the child and the school. Another example is the parent who seeks tutoring help for the child. Healthy families usually signal the society through involvement, mindful behavior, community participation, and other such actions. These positive signals should be supported and encouraged. Positive responses from professionals can indeed nurture continuing health and wellness in families.

In *high context, supportive societies* the family-environment linkage is so strong that family feedback is used in a continual manner to strengthen the human system (Hall, 1984). For example, in his study of China's socialization process, Chance (1984, p. 127) states:

> Growing old is never easy. But in Half Moon Village, the process is at least softened by the continuing opportunity to share in all aspects of daily life for as long as people choose and are able to.

Contemporary societies need to see family feedback as a healthy sign that people want to be a part of life and want to have a system in which every person's growth is valued and nurtured. It is in the disappearance of viable families that the importance of the feedback process is most clearly realized.

The Realities of Troubled Families

All families seek to have harmony, some form of homeostasis and some system by which they can respond to life's demands in proactive ways. Indeed most families achieve an *ecological fit with their environment* that enables them to carry out various roles and functions. A reciprocity among family members and the community is achieved as the family grows. When this feedback is disrupted, accommodations in the family and the society are essential to the restoration of balance (Walsh, 1985). In some cases, the family's system is so badly damaged that distorted ways of relating are developed (Kempe & Kempe, 1978).

When family control skills and corresponding support systems disappear, the potential for pathological behavior increases greatly. Persistent unemployment, alcoholism, mental health problems, lack of socio-educational skills, and deficits in interpersonal dynamics have all been related to family pathologies. Indicators that a family pathology such as child abuse or spouse abuse may be emerging or in process include: excessive levels of verbal abuse, persistent and intense family conflicts, continuous and pervasive levels of aggression, community isolation, a history of prior family pathologies, and major antisocial behaviors (Gelles & Cornell, 1985).

The dynamics of family pathologies are not difficult to understand when placed within a social context that actually promotes violent and destructive behavior. Television programming is oriented toward violence and often promotes aggressive life styles. In a summary of research on violence in domestic relationships, Gelles and Cornell (1985, p. 113) state that:

> The widespread acceptability of physical punishment to raise children creates a situation where a conflict-prone institution serves as a training ground to teach children that it is acceptable (1) to hit people you love, (2) for powerful people to hit less powerful people, (3) to use hitting to achieve some end or goal, and (4) to hit as an end in itself.

In pathological situations, a distorted form of negotiation takes place in which high levels of aggression and violence become an acceptable means for clinging to a family survival mentality. In her book, *The Battered Woman*, Lenore Walker (1979) observes that women who are beaten lose their personal integrity skills to such a degree that a barbaric level of acceptable aggression is often used to simply survive. The situation is similar in child abuse and neglect situations, with the true emotional trauma surfacing later in the children's adult lives. For example, a child may rationalize abusive treatment as an acceptable form of love only to later recognize the self-harm that ensued.

A cycle of aggressive, chaotic, and mindless behaviors typify many family pathologies. There is however, a pattern to these antisocial behaviors. A typical pathology cycle proceeds as such: (1) a gradual increase in family stress, (2) a failure to deal with the stressors in a problem-solving manner, (3) minor arguments and possible abusive behaviors in response to the stress-related frustrations, (4) major outbursts among family members (which usually include violent behaviors), (5) a superficial attempt to restore family equilibrium, and (6) an expansion and escalation of this cycle, moving the family toward total dysfunction (Walker, 1979).

One factor common to families in pathological contexts is their limited repertoire of problem-solving skills. Unable to cope with heavy stress for lack of support and/or a lack of insights related to resolving interpersonal conflicts, aggressive and violent behavior patterns are resorted to as a means of functioning. The family is a natural context for pathologies to occur because it is in the family that our social learning skills are first formed. Later, these antisocial behaviors are replicated in other social situations. It should be no surprise that crime, especially homicides, are more prevalent in the family than in any other social setting (Gelles & Cornell, 1985). Indeed, recent increases in domestic violence has prompted the International Pediatric Society (1986) to project that future pediatric care will center more on children's emotional maladies than on their physical problems. In the same report, Haggerty suggests that prevention of maladaptive families can best occur as they are guided toward expanding their communication time and increasing their pool of problem-solving skills.

Lessons learned from the study of healthy families provide us with insights for supporting the development of positive family relationships. Prevention is the key to resolving many family pathologies. Empowerment is a concept that calls for supporting individuals and families to reach their full potential. This concept needs to permeate our work with all families.

Helping Troubled Families

Families in trouble are usually confronting multiple problems of a chronic nature. Helping professionals in the early childhood years have a unique opportunity to have a positive and supportive influence on families in at risk situations. Indeed, the emphasis is on "professionals" and "helpers" as the stressors young families confront require a concerted effort on the part of everyone in the community. Six components of this helping process are briefly reviewed. These components provide a working framework for addressing the many needs of troubled families.

Community awareness of the intricacies that comprise family risks is a critical starting point. Enlightening the public about family pathologies and the effects of family dysfunction on the community is a task that every helping professional can perform. For example, recent findings that community social problems such as crime are interrelated with family dysfunction is knowledge that should be integrated into the community's thinking. Likewise, the recognition that school readiness and family wellness are linked to each other is information that should permeate our efforts to create healthy families through various community supports. This awareness function can influence how city councils vote, how citizens respond to local problems, and on how social service agencies organize and deliver services (Boyer, 1991).

Recent research supports the need for an emphasis on *prevention of situations that promote family problems*. The use of parent education and family support services early in the family's life are two effective prevention strategies (Kempe & Kempe, 1978; Powell, 1989). For example, considerable evidence shows that positive intervention with at risk, first-time parents can influence their parenting in productive ways (White & Kaban, 1979; Weiss & Jacobs, 1988). Additional work with families indicates that comprehensive family support programs, particularly family preservation strategies, are positively influencing the family development process (Swick, 1991).

A significant part of prevention and correction efforts is the use of *diagnostic services*. Most family problems have sources of stress that can be identified and addressed. Individual child and parent stressors can also be assessed and treated. For example, characteristics of families in risk situations include: isolation, chemical dependence, extreme poverty, illiteracy, low self-image, antisocial behavior syndromes, and other attributes. Recognition of the sources of family stress is a first step in resolving the problems. Child assessments are another example of the value of diagnostic services. Consider the value of simple hearing and vision checkups in preventing and/or resolving what could be long term stressors for young children (White, 1988). An emerging empowerment focus is on helping families utilize *self-assessment* techniques in promoting their wellness. In contrast to the past emphasis on solving isolated family or individual problems, current efforts are focusing on a systems approach to family wellness (Garbarino, 1982).

Coordination of family services through effective case management is a continuing thread of support efforts. Matching family needs with appropriate and viable services is a part of the early childhood educators skill kit. Teachers of young children are looked to by parents as sources of community knowledge. Many early childhood programs are moving beyond individual efforts with the establishment of "Family Learning Centers." These "centers" provide an arena in which families can locate, access, and use various literacy and wellness resources (Swick, 1991).

Supportive helping behaviors are the primary resource that all early childhood professionals have and can actualize in their family helping efforts. The road to positive mental health among families is best realized when they have helpers who are supportive of their integrity and autonomy. In our work with parents and children we can build positive family relationship influences by reinforcing the worth of every person we touch, helping them access the resources in their environment, and relating to them in equal and responsive ways (Powell, 1988).

Continued follow-through is critical to the emerging health of problem families. Research has shown that family wellness is not an isolated process, taking shape in one or two years. Rather, it is a process that needs constant attention. Continued contacts with families, encouraging family involvement in the community, and supporting healthy family relationships are some helping behaviors all early childhood educators can perform on an ongoing basis (Gordon, 1977).

Becoming a Part of the Family

Schools, workplaces, and other social contexts are, by their very nature, significant parts of the family's system. An unconscious relationship between and among the systems that influence families is not a productive situation. A mindful approach to creating harmonious relationships among the family and society is essential to long-term health. Teachers of young children know too well the need for strong, supportive relationships with families. Yet, in too many cases schools and other social institutions ignore the family when they make decisions.

There are several dimensions to orchestrating a meaningful family-school relationship but the key is that the professionals involved are cognizant of their role in the family's development. This role involves teachers in first recognizing that what they do, whether it is with the child or the parent, impacts the entire family; and second, their program approach should center on the family as a dynamic system that is the child's key learning environment (Hamner & Turner, 1992).

The recognition that the child development center or school can be a significant part of the family's feedback system requires the following: a philosophical position that focuses on the family as the center of the learning process; the involvement of all staff in applying this philosophy to every aspect of their work; the expectation of a system by which parents and professionals form a true partnership; and a process for continually assessing the viability of the partnership (Swick, 1984).

Early childhood educators reveal their beliefs about families through many interactions, beginning with their relationships with children. Teacher perceptions of children range from *molding them* to *guiding them*. Gordon (1977) noted that when teachers view children as active learners who are nested in ecological settings of which the family is the most important, they plan and carry out their roles in a more sensitive manner. This holistic view of human learning and development leads teachers to another insight Gordon noted: that to teach a child is to reach the family and that to teach the parent is to reach the child and the family for a lifetime. These insights provide a basis upon which early childhood programs can build a strong parent and family involvement program.

The realization of a family-centered early childhood philosophy is supported by an analysis of our actions with children and parents. Questions such as the following provide us with tools to use in reviewing our status as related to this paradigm: Are we involving families in the process of program decisions? How are our program activities influencing families? Does the curriculum reflect the children's family cultures? How often and in what ways are we communicating with families? Are parents involved in our program as resource people, sharing their talents and interests?

Early childhood professionals who *think family* interact with parents and children in sensitive and responsive ways. Alert to family needs and strengths, the family-oriented professional extends his reach to special needs situations parents may face or engages in helping children understand particular family stressors. In the larger context, helping professionals work to promote a family-sensitive philosophy throughout the community. They also pursue other family-support practices: providing a pleasant and inviting classroom learning environment, respecting the uniqueness of each family, and fostering high expectations for children and families.

Part Two

RELATING TO THE SPECIAL NEEDS OF FAMILIES

Several factors have influenced the rise in the special needs situations families experience: an increasingly complex society, higher performance expectations for individuals and families, more knowledge about special family needs, changes in marital and family roles and functions, and other social and individual changes. With increased expectations, parents and children are experiencing new stressors and confronting these challenges with fewer human resources. One outcome of this change process has been a dramatic alteration in the structure of families, with family diversity emerging as the norm. Likewise, the pressures on families have placed many parents and children in at risk situations. The rise in dysfunctional family relationship patterns is also evidence of this need to address the many challenges today's families experience.

A predominant theme in this part of the book is that all families, at one point or another, experience special situations. A critical role of the early childhood professional is to understand these special needs situations and to respond to them in supportive and caring ways. **Chapter Five** presents an overview of the stressors that many families face, with an emphasis on how parent and family burnout can lead to dysfunctionality without proper intervention. It reviews some of the key indicators of special needs family behavior patterns and offers some suggestions on how helping professionals can respond in positive ways. An emphasis on using a team approach (interagency efforts) is explored.

The divorce and remarriage rate is one indicator of the special needs context in which families are under heavy stress. **Chapter Six** includes material on the particular stressors confronted by *Transformed Families*. The change process, as it evolves in transformed families, is articulated and related to various behaviors usually present in parent and child relationships. Particular emphasis is given to the special needs of single parents, foster parents, teen parents, and step parents. In each case, the process of transformation is integrated within an ecological view of the family as a learning system. Strategies and guidelines for working with transformed families are also presented. These suggestions are couched within the predominant message that understanding and caring are professional behaviors that can play a major role in the family support process.

The gradual erosion of the economic and social security of the family's system has placed many parents and children in at risk situations. **Chapter Seven** explicates the key risks that threaten children and families during the early years and offers a framework for responding to these risk factors. An ecological/empathetic perspective is presented, with the focus being on empowering families during this early and formative period of development.

Finally, the realities and complexities of family dysfunction are explored, with concrete ideas presented on ways that early childhood educators can attempt to help families who are caught in relationship cycles that are destructive of their lives.

The reality that over half of all families are (at one time or another) experiencing special needs, risk factors, or confronting dysfunctional relationships is alarming. It is critical for early childhood professionals to acquire an understanding of these problems and challenges, and to be able to respond with care and compassion. The theme of this part of the book is that we as professionals can have a positive influence on special needs families.

Chapter Five

SPECIAL NEEDS FAMILIES

All families experience special needs situations. The disruption of family functioning in any form is stressful. In healthy families periods of disruption are usually dealt with in a productive manner. The arrival of a new baby, for example, may bring new stress to the family. Most parents anticipate this stress to some degree and adapt family rituals to accommodate the changes. In various ways parents and families attempt to create a healthy balance in the change-stability process as it evolves within family dynamics. Indeed, a major characteristic of healthy families is their use of problem solving strategies in evaluating change and altering family behaviors to meet the demands of new situations (Schwartzman, 1985).

What creates a *special needs situation* is when the family context is disrupted in intense, enduring ways. Continuing, intense stress that occurs as a result of major changes in family structure or family relationships (or typically both) can erode the integrity of the family. Situations such as family illness, death, an alcoholic member, marital discord, or severe economic trauma may absorb so much family energy that routine functions are neglected. Families who find themselves absorbed in special situations need help. Often, their need is for support in some form that enables them to use their own capacities to regain control of their lives (Swick, 1984; Galinsky, 1990). The rapid rise in the incidence of special needs family situations and of *parent burnout* are instructive of the unique dynamics of family life in complex societies.

Factors Influencing the Rise in Special Needs Families

Dramatic social changes have influenced family functioning. One glaring example is found in the workplace. In 1950, most families relied on one member to provide economic sustenance. In 1990 this structural feature of family life had been altered dramatically with a majority of families now relying on two incomes (Swick, 1991). Other work/family context and roles changes include: a dramatic increase in the participation of women in the work force, the creation and use of new work technologies, an increase in needed education for meaningful participation in the economy, a rise in expectations regarding quality of life issues, and an increase in the mobility of the work force to meet changing economic and social needs (Halpern, 1987).

In response to these changes, many families have altered their context in an attempt to reach a balance in the family/workplace relationship. For example, with the need for more family energy going to work roles out of the home, parents have been forced to become better at managing family time. Likewise, with increased job mobility, families have had to find more creative ways of linking up to community supports. While families have had to confront the problem of fewer supports, they have also experienced rising expectations related to their role in educating children. In effect, families confront a very complex challenge of meeting high expectations regarding family and work roles (Swick, 1984).

Fortunately, a healthy outcome of this changing societal and family relationship has been the recognition that we must have healthy people and that we must alter how we view and support families. Through research and social action, more is known about how special needs families develop, how to help them, and in many cases—how to prevent such problems from happening (Schorr & Schorr, 1988). The essence of the meaning of the dramatic social change experienced by families is that they must become more sophisticated in shaping family life, with particular emphasis on interrelating better with their environment. If such a balance is not achieved, the demands on family energy can become so powerful as to drain their problem-solving resources, thus creating the potential for burnout (Curran, 1985; Walsh, 1985). Consider as just one example the special situation of the alcoholic family. The *culture of the family* becomes so focused on the alcoholic (and the distorted relationship patterns that emanate from the situation) that a circular process of destructive interactions emerges to drain the family of its health. Indeed if the cycle of destruction is not disrupted, burnout is a likely event (Towers, 1989a). In less dramatic ways, stress is a major force in the lives of many families with special needs.

Burnout: A Pervasive Family Situation

While families are not like factory systems, they do function in systemic modes (Anderson & Carter, 1984). They are or should be *open systems* that have the potential for growth through productive exchanges with other systems. Like any system, however, families may experience situations that exceed their capacity—creating the potential for harm. Any system that is unable to maintain a *needs-resources balance* within a reasonable structure has a high potential for burning itself out. In systems language, *a load factor* is developed to help minimize the possibility of a system burnout. For example, in bridge construction a maximum weight is established as the load limit, anything exceeding the limit for an extended time period is likely to cause it to buckle. In other words, every system has a pressure or stress limit which if exceeded may cause erosion of its integrity. As a human system the family is vulnerable to any stressors that may erode its integrity (Edelman, 1987; Kerr & Bowman, 1988).

As families experience the impact of social change in the form of role changes, increased demands on their time, or in a reduction of support, the process of maintaining family functioning becomes very complex. What happens to many families is that their *perceived needs are not matched by their available resources* and as this situation intensifies, the *system integrity* of the family is eroded in a gradual, cumulative manner. With the erosion of integrity comes a loss of control, a corresponding loss of energy, a decrease in communication, and an increase in mindless action. Once this cycle of burnout is in place it often absorbs all of the family's energy until the system itself is destroyed (Burland, 1984; Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

The intensity of the family stress syndrome is so powerful that in many cases the family is well along the path to burnout before symptoms are recognized. Indications that the family's integrity is being challenged include severe family conflicts, inability of family members to cope with the outside world, erratic family decision-making patterns, and poor communication behaviors. When these indicators occur in clusters and are intense and enduring, family burnout is likely. An added dimension in this process is that special needs families begin to see only the negative elements of life and adopt a fatal view of their future (Cohler, 1984). With a sense of pessimism infecting their lives, many parents and children make less effort at trying to influence their behavior toward positive outcomes.

The abusing family is one example of how the burnout process can occur. Often role changes such as the wife taking on a major economic role and the husband needing to increase domestic involvement may stimulate a cluster of events that disrupt the family's "normal system." If such changes are not accompanied by communication, planning, and open discussion of new or emerging stressors, the marital relationship can be severely strained. In turn, this stress can ripple through all of the family's interactions and relationships. Left unchecked, the emergence of abuse occurs and the resultant state of fear can pervade the family. Family functioning is impeded and the potential for burnout is high. A common pattern of behavior is for the family members to react to this *high-stress syndrome* by rigidifying their expectations of each other and creating extremely limited conditions for acceptance of each other.

What started out as a family change process now escalates into a family abuse situation (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

Symptoms of family burnout are evident in every facet of the society: increased divorce rates, family related homicides, spouse and child abuse, adolescent suicide, poor work performance, school failure, and psychological withdrawal from community activities (Pence, 1988). These indicators suggest that burnout is rooted in a tragic imbalance between demands made on the family and available resources they can use to negotiate the demands. Further, these indicators suggest a critical inability of stressed families to constructively manage their responses in complex situations when they lack needed supports. Striking a child, for example, may reveal the culmination of years of frustration in trying to make the system work. Family burnout symptoms also indicate that a primary source of correcting and/or preventing the problem is in the societal context itself. In essence, it is clear that we are asking too much of families while providing them with inadequate resources to remain viable (Hamburg, 1992).

A critical beginning point in resolving this burnout process lies in the recognition of the context factors that have created it. One way to frame the situation is to depict burnout factors in comparison to the indicators usually present in healthy families. In healthy families, for example, the needed *balance between needs and resources* is usually achieved through the use of a mindful, problem-solving approach. In effect, parents create a proactive pattern of living that is responsive to most normal stressors, identifying the stress and adapting family resources and relationships in ways that allow for productive change. This process includes some positive change; it is a way in which families project, respond, and react to stress that creates their unique pattern of living (Bettelheim, 1987).

Ineffective families do not see themselves as in control of their lives. They tend to be unhappy an inordinate amount of the time, exhibit a low stress threshold most of the time, and appear to be focused mainly on their problems as opposed to their strengths (Curran, 1985). Healthy and unhealthy families typically confront many of the same problems, although the degree of intensity of these problems may differ greatly. Financial problems confront most families, yet severe poverty naturally creates a situation that can degrade the family's functioning in this domain. While it is not the complete source of family stress, there is evidence that indicates that low self-image and low control contribute greatly to family dysfunction (Sigel, 1985).

The recognition that *internal control* is a key behavior in family stress management is a needed step toward productive family life. Mindlessness and family burnout are highly correlated and appear to produce a context that is dysfunctional. Parent and family educational programs and services that involve families in strengthening their control skills are useful modes of empowering parents and children. Examples of some of the major themes in these programs are: dealing with role changes in the family, time management, using family resources, family communication skills, using community resources, and family teaming skills (Swick, 1985).

Current factors that are compounding the family burnout syndrome include the rise in single parent families, economic stressors not previously experienced in our society, economic and educational expectations, and a plethora of other social problems (Halpern, 1987). There is no single response to resolving this syndrome. Major context changes (educational and economic in particular) in our communities, schools, neighborhoods, and workplaces must occur before families can be expected to reach their potential. When community and societal resources are more adequate families can become more functional.

Beyond family burnout are many other special needs situations which families confront at various points in the life cycle. An understanding of the major indicators of these situations is critical to having effective relationships with children and families.

Indicators of Special Needs Situations

The disruption of family life is damaging at any point in the family's history, particularly so during the early childhood years. Klein (1985) relates that when he and his wife *came to the realization that their child was spastic cerebral palsy they had a sense of rage at this invasion of the family's normal development.* In less dramatic ways (but no less significant) many families experience a similar sense of *rage, fear,* and *futility* when stricken by an event that drastically alters their life. It might be a *death in the family,* ensuing or occurring *divorce, mental health problem,* or a *job loss* by one of the family that prompts the development of a special needs situation. In some cases it may be the interaction of several stressors that leave the family in a powerless position.

While each family experiences special needs situations in unique ways there are some *common indicators of family behavior that reflect the presence of excessive stress.* Each indicator is explored within the contexts of different families as they may encounter them.

Most people are not well prepared to respond to major changes in life. Reflect on a major change that has happened to you in the past, most likely you did not want others to know about it—with the possible exception of a close or intimate friend. You wanted to be *alone or isolated* from your usual routine. This is similar to how a single parent feels when they first realize the dramatic change that has taken place in their life (Greenberg, 1985). The following is how one mother describes her initial reaction to being a single parent.

> I felt dead, like something had died in my life. The many fights were over. Now it seemed as if those fights had filled a need to cling to my life. But now everything seemed cloudy. My daughter felt the same way, like an awful sense of relief—death. Except for work or school neither of us left the house for over half of the year.

This mother's desire to be alone is similar to what most people experience when they first deal with trauma. In part, this sense and reality of isolation is a healthy response to extreme stress. Our system prompts us to retreat from the routines of daily life so that we can focus on healing (Kearns & Berger, 1985). Another positive feature of this *aloneness syndrome* is that it provides people with a chance to sort out the pieces of the crisis they experienced. While temporary isolation from the environment can serve as a healing and renewing time it must not become a continuous pattern of living. There is also a time for rejoining the world of action. Ann Lefling's experience is helpful in gaining a perspective on how many special needs families rebuild bridges to their environment.

> The turning point for me was a phone call from my daughter's teacher. She asked if Sue could go with some other students to an art show. I told her I doubted Sue would want to go. She said I think she will go if you encourage her and maybe you should come too. She went on: you know Ann, you and Sue will have to become a part of things again someday. Yes, I said, I know we have been in this house too much. Let me talk with Sue and I'll call you back.

Ann and Sue Lefling did go to the art show and began their entry into school and community activities. This process of ending the isolation period is usually gradual, challenging, and many times a mixture of humor and tragedy. It is an essential process if the family is to regain a viable identity and position itself for growing and learning through a myriad of new relationships (Galinsky, 1987).

New and disparate situations often challenge family perceptions to a point where usual reasoning patterns give way to *distorted views of life* (Swick, 1984). Every person constructs a view of reality that is useful for carrying out the many transactions of life. Even under mildly stressful conditions people develop less than accurate perceptions of life. Most people recognize this and postpone decision making until their system is back in balance. The stress of the holidays, for example, can produce anxiety in the family, which in turn sets off distorted reasoning patterns that may lead to family arguments. Most families recognize this stress process and absorb it into their family system (Curran, 1985).

Yet in traumatic or crisis situations the family identity is so threatened that *reality is not an acceptable entity*. Bill Thompson's refusal to accept the reality of his wife's death is an example of how this distortion process works.

> For weeks after her death I continued many habits that *we* had developed. We were such a team that doing certain things by myself was unacceptable. I set two cups of coffee, made reference to her in social settings, and even had her favorite dress cleaned. Finally, one day my daughter blurted it out: Dad, she's gone and we have to accept it. We had a good cry and for the very first time I could say it: yes, Helen is dead.

This reality distortion process is a normal pattern of behavior; it represents the individual's attempt to hold onto their reality and validate it as part of their history. With the right conditions families under stress can begin the task of constructing a reality that is supportive of their growth and development. As families help each other recognize their reality problems they can discuss them, internalize them, and begin to form a basis for structuring a new reality. The process of reconstructing reality will require a supportive family environment. Relatives, friends, counselors, and other helping professionals can be an important part of this process.

Special needs families often find their way back to healthy functioning through the communication process. In the midst of trauma most families sense (during or after the crisis) *a breakdown in their communicative relationships* (Swick, 1987). The energy that was once used to communicate with each other is now diverted toward the crisis. Productive communication requires enough family synchrony for people to understand each other and to invest time in listening to each other. High-stress situations such as severe unemployment, spouse abuse, emotional trauma in a family member, or a prolonged family illness may disrupt the family's equilibrium and thus impede their usual communication behaviors (Swick, 1984). In many instances this disruption is needed so that each person can relate to the crisis in their own unique way. In a sense, it is a healthy way to regroup at the individual level. The time is used to recognize individual and family contexts so that communication can resume in a meaningful way. Sue Ward's experience is indicative of this process.

> My divorce from Bob was a first in our family and my parents were, at first, totally overwhelmed. Our telephone conversations were cold and our visits were even colder. My sisters were much the same way; it was like I was no longer part of the family. Soon I became defensive and withdrawn in all of my family relationships.

Sue's parents were rude to her and indeed very unsupportive! They needed time to sort out their daughter's situation, time to put this trauma into perspective, and time to renew their position in a changed family. In time, they began to reopen their relationship with their daughter. At first Sue was cautious, not wanting to go through the rejection again. As families are able to gain a sense of harmony in their new context, communication is usually renewed.

Even during periods of extreme stress, families communicate (or should) in some form; often it is nonverbal or informal support actions that enable them to maintain their integrity so that when they have survived the crisis their verbal, social interaction, and emotional relationships can resume (Galinsky, 1987). For example, couples who continue communicative relationships during and after divorce appear to maintain family and individual integrity more than those who cut off this needed linkage to their identity (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989).

The lack of continuing and meaningful communication in families is a signal that family stability is very precarious. Stinnett (1980) notes that families thrive on communication—internally and externally. It is the core of their integrity. It may be that as a culture we are creating a new special needs category in the form of *communication-deprived families*. Fast foods, television, work demands, and new forms of recreational outlets have altered the context of family life, creating an arena that discourages communication. The restoration of family time must certainly be considered a priority of family education (Edelman, 1992).

The presence of *high-stress levels on a continuing basis* is indicative of a family in trouble. Descriptions of this chronic stress condition as it often occurs in families indicate: it is all encompassing in that it absorbs the family's energy; it permeates literally all aspects of family life; and it can, if left unchecked, destroy the family's integrity and lead the family toward dysfunctionality (Kagan & Schlosberg, 1989). All families experience stress and usually develop a system for integrating it into their context. Some families, as Stinnett (1979) points out, can handle stress more effectively because they have developed a control scheme that places it within a functional arrangement.

The vulnerability of families to stress is related to their respective histories, situations, and identities (Erikson, 1982). High-risk families are usually prone to stress because of their already fragile situation. The vulnerability characteristic of high-risk families is the result of various factors (which are often found in combinations): the early family development was impeded by social, personal, or economic trauma; the parents were unable or unwilling to commit to the family building process; the family was overloaded with too much stress; or the family was unable to respond effectively to an individual's crisis.

Central to the family's ability to deal with stress is their control orientation. A weak control system is usually evident in high-risk families as indicated in the pattern of mindless responses to change. As Jill Hessin explains:

> We were too young to have a family (17 at the birth of the first child). We just existed and never planned or thought about what we did. As the problems got worse we drank more. No family, we were no family!

This family eventually became totally dysfunctional and only community intervention was able to resolve the situation. Two strategies that may help prevent or redirect this pathology are: the use of parent education to help parents develop needed control skills for managing family dynamics, and early identification of high-risk families with appropriate actions taken to strengthen their integrity (Swick, 1984, 1987, 1991).

Members of special needs families often experience much *difficulty in performing their roles beyond the family* such as at work or in school. Their energy is directed toward resolving the family predicament in such intense modes that little energy is left for work or school (Boss, 1988; Curran, 1985). Absenteeism, poor work performance, job loss, job dissatisfaction, and other workplace difficulties are higher among members of special needs families (Kamerman & Hayes, 1982). Also, children from special needs families experience more school-related problems (Swick, 1991). Poor work performance and school difficulties are not caused by special needs situations, *but* *are interrelated with the family's overall stress response patterns.* Sensitive and supportive relationships at work or school can positively influence families in relating to their stress more effectively. In particular, professional support resources are effective in helping parents and children cope with these problems (Garbarino, 1982).

Feelings of despair and deterioration of parental beliefs in the future are common in parents who are coping with special needs (Sigel, 1985). Parental beliefs regarding children's potential and the family's future influence the total family system. When Bill Franks lost his job, he developed negative views of other life situations. Soon he recognized that his attitude had also influenced everyone else in the family. Fortunately he was skilled enough to realize he needed help in rebuilding his focus in life.

Special needs families need supports that can enable them to regain control of their environment. Early childhood educators can perform a major role in this support process.

Becoming a Part of the Family's Life

Whoever is involved with children is also involved with families because the very nature of the family is such that whatever happens to one person influences all who are a part of the context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Unfortunately, this premise is not often adhered to in the work of helping professionals. For example, many teacher contacts with children are not used to fully promote learning in the family. Initially, efforts to become a part of the special needs family should focus on the *teaching context* as it relates to family learning and not simply the child's learning. Later, this process can and should be extended to examining the family's context as it relates to the learning process at home and at school. Ultimately, this interactive process needs to be seen and related to as a partnership effort.

The context of the teaching/learning process is only limited by the vision and efforts of teachers. One can study context by observing what happens in the classroom, what is displayed on bulletin boards, how people behave with each other, what teachers, children, and parents tell about their school experiences, and by assessing other factors such as the physical arrangement of the school (Purkey & Novak, 1984).

The following are criteria-focused questions that can be used to assess one's context as it relates to meeting the needs of special needs families: Am I knowledgeable about the types of situations special needs families confront? What do I know about the families of the children I teach? What kinds of things have I carried out to support special needs families and how have they worked? What do I do in the classroom to help children acquire a better understanding of the situations special needs families experience? Am I sensitive to the signals families send regarding special or unique situations they confront?

Additional criteria can be articulated by teachers as they engage in supporting families. The important point is that *teacher context* influences what can and does happen between families and schools. For example, in a *high-context teaching situation* a history of positive family contacts exists and thus responding to family needs is often a natural feature of the family's relationship with the school (Swick, 1985). Where there is little interaction between families and school (*low context*), the recognition of family needs is unlikely, in fact the school influence may be negative.

Indicators of a strong teacher context are found in schools and classrooms where regular contacts are made with parents, educational programs are designed for parents as well as children, and where parents are visible partners in carrying out the learning process. This type of context not only promotes sensitive responses to family needs but may prevent many crises through meaningful interactions that strengthen families (Epstein & Dauber, 1991).

An awareness of *family context* provides a basis for sensible action. In many cases, families in trouble are too involved in their intra-family stress to even think about their relationships with others. Sensitive actions by the teacher may be the needed stimulus for enabling the family to regroup in their attempts to find stability. Arlene Jordan's experience with Jed's teacher is a case in point:

> Ms. Kemp was a real blessing to Jed and me. Jed's father left us and we were in a state of total confusion. Ms. Kemp called me and she knew that right now Jed needed a special friend. Could she spend some extra time with him. Her special attention to Jed was a major factor in the way he and I dealt with the situation. I saw that someone cared and that meant so much to me.

In understanding and relating to the needs of families with major stress, five areas need attention. First, *the elements of the special needs situation must be known.* For example, what has happened to the family that has disrupted their functioning: death, illness, emotional problems, economic disruption, recent relocation, or another stressor. Knowing the intricacies of a situation should be handled sensitively and in confidence. Families under stress do want others to understand their predicament but are protective of their integrity.

We need to respect family wishes while also reaching out to them in efforts to understand their problem (Dunst & Trivette & Deal, 1988).

Second, we need to know *how the family's functioning has been influenced by the stress* they are experiencing. Every family responds differently to stress and indeed may react to different stressors in quite different modes. Some families turn inward more than other families. In some cases families seek outside support, in others they cherish the internal healing time. Most families combine these response patterns. Through supportive interactions with families, early childhood educators can realize how they can best relate to particular situations. A third factor to consider is *what can be done to help the family*. It may be a situation where a child needs special attention. Or, a family may simply want their situation to be understood. In other cases specialized help from a community group is needed. A fourth element deals with *helping families access and use available and needed community resources*. This is of particular importance because families under stress are less likely to realize the existence of community supports or to understand how they can use these resources. A fifth and very critical element deals with *supporting children in their coping with the special needs situation* within the classroom and school environment. This may involve us in altering our expectations for the child while he or she adjusts to the stress. It may also involve our spending more time with them, keeping in touch with their parents more often, or relating their situation to what is happening around them (Swick, 1987).

It is clear that families with special needs require a high level of support. In some cases this support needs to be long term. Consider the following as ideas for bringing about this needed support structure.

The most direct contact teachers have with families is through the curriculum they provide for children. By building a *caring curriculum* that involves children, parents, and teachers in forming various affective skills and attitudes, special needs families are better able to relate their issues and concerns to the school context. It is through learning to care for others that we find a new potential in ourselves for dealing with the many stressors of life (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). A part of a truly caring curriculum is the sharing of resources among learners with special needs. From involvement in helping out at a senior citizens center to supporting fellow classmates in need, children and parents can acquire the sensitivities and skills for better responding to each other and to their fellow citizens.

A need that parents and children under chronic stress often express is to have a person or group that can function as a sounding board. Their need is for feedback to help them sort through the various dimensions of their situation. One useful strategy is the formation of *helping networks* of people who have confronted similar problems. Relating to others who have had a similar experience provides a common ground for gaining needed ideas for coping and healing. In many cases these networks have helped families increase their ability to solve problems, create new family relationship patterns, and to relate their situation more effectively to their environment (Klein, 1985; Powell, 1989; Stinnett, 1982).

While communication is essential in any school program it takes on an added emphasis in relating to special needs families. Research indicates that families under stress *seek more feedback than in normal situations*. Continuous communication can help families and schools in at least the following ways: provide a context for sharing concerns and achievements, allow for the exchange of ideas on various needs, increase the potential for having mutually supportive relationships, and strengthen the family-school bond (Swick, 1991).

Information on how to respond to stress is another concern of special needs families. Parent education programs directed toward information for special parent populations have proven useful. Mayesky (1979) designed and implemented a program for single parents and found that the information enabled parents to manage their situations more effectively. Teachers involved in this program reported better relationships with the parents and more responsiveness in the children's school involvement. Powell (1989) reports that informal networking among parents is another way of meeting this need.

Critical to the relationship between schools and special needs families is the orientation of teachers to the dynamics of families under stress. The continuing education and renewal of teachers' understanding and relating to special needs family situations is a vital part of the helping process. Schools can be a major force in helping families under stress when teachers are equipped to integrate these issues into their programs.

A Team Approach To Helping

The historical development of early childhood education provides a context that includes a variety of strategies for serving special needs families. The use of multiple disciplines and professionals with different skills is essential. By teaming, early childhood professionals can utilize each other's skills and talents in preventive and remediation efforts (Swick & Duff, 1978).

Effective teaming (often referenced as case management, interagency planning, or by other terms) requires a system that promotes both organizational and interpersonal collaboration among various professionals and helpers. Different models have proven effective (Swick, 1991). Common to these models, however, is an orientation toward family involvement in determining their needs and the involvement of various professionals in supporting families. Involving professionals from different disciplines in working together, learning together, and planning together can strengthen this needed collaboration process. Community involvement is critical to this teaming process. It is essential that the parent perspective be a part of this process (Dunst, Trivette, & Deal, 1988).

An excellent example of this process is being employed to pursue proper maternal and infant health care. Individuals from many different professions and helping roles are working together in programs like WIC and Babynet to encourage and support parents to develop proper maternal/infant health care habits. Nutritionists are educating parents on diet, rest, and health care issues related to preventing birth defects and birth related complexities such as low birth weight. Pediatricians are extending this process by guiding parent involvement in the family's total health care. Parent educators often focus on providing parents with information and skills related to providing the child with a positive home learning arrangement (Garbarino, 1982; Powell, 1989).

Critical to the healthy functioning of all families (but particularly families in risk situations) is their having access to supportive services and people that will enable them to gain some meaningful control over their lives. In cases where the stress or problem can be identified early, appropriate resources allocated, and continuing support provided, many family risk situations can be prevented. For example, research supports providing parents and children with needed nutrition, economic support, and educational involvement to preclude stressors from evolving into major family impediments (Swick, 1987). In cases where families are engaged in chronic, multi-problem situations, specialized services (currently being delivered within many *family preservation programs*) can short circuit stressors, freeing families to pursue healthier ways of living (Kagan & Schlosberg, 1989).

A teaming approach provides early childhood professionals of different disciplines with an opportunity to learn about each other's strengths and needs. Through collaboration many teams have strengthened themselves and been more effective in meeting the needs of families. Further, they have become more sensitive to the different dimensions of how special needs families respond to stress.

Healthy and Unhealthy Responses to Stress by Families

How do families respond to stress. Two patterns of family responses to stress are presented with the purpose being to sensitize the professional to the need for understanding families and to gain a perspective on how teaming can strengthen the professional/family relationship.

At the outset of any major stress or trauma, most families sense a major change in their lifestyle along with a corresponding increase in negative stress (Klein, 1983). This is often called the *alarm stage* or the *anticipation stage*. For example, couples about to separate report that they and other family members had sensed the ensuing breakup for a considerable period of time. The tension emanating from martial discord acted as an alarm system, alerting the family to prepare for an immediate, disruptive experience. Most special needs families experience this alarm or anticipation process. Yet, it is how families respond to the stress and the sources of stress that comprise their situation. It is known, for example, that successful family scenarios are characterized as using this alarm process as a way of preparing for change. That is, *the alarm is used proactively as a means of developing effective ways to best deal with the stress and its source.* Ineffective family responses are typically characterized as passive, not responding to the alarm. The stress is allowed to control the family, often presenting the family with extreme stress (Honig, 1986; Kearns & Berger, 1985).

When the full power of stressors like death, marital dissolution, chronic unemployment, family burnout, or a combination of these events take hold of families, two stages of reaction are likely: *shock/disbelief, and anger* (Swick, 1984, 1987). Healthy and unhealthy family scenarios help to highlight how parents and children react uniquely to these stages of need. Naturally, the degree of shock will vary according to the severity of the tragedy or disruptive force. When the family system is overwhelmed it must have a temporary insulation from other realities in order to heal and regain needed energy. Both healthy and unhealthy families experience shock. *Healthy families, however, usually realize what is happening (or help each other come to this realization)* and thus are more responsive to the healing process than unhealthy families. In unhealthy family responses, the shock and anger become pervasive stressors that direct the family's energy toward internal dysfunction. This response pattern impedes the healing process and may destroy the family unless it receives intensive support from others (Curran, 1985; Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

Anger is the third stage of the reaction pattern among special needs families. A feeling of *why us* is prevalent within family relationships. Every family experiences this feeling when confronting trauma or post-trauma shock. It is how this feeling is dealt with that differentiates healthy and unhealthy family reactions. Most families, given a supportive cast of helpers and past success in handling special problems, redirect this anger toward constructive outcomes. They may create new family rituals and/or take a new interest in the special talents of each other. Or, they may join peer group teams that have experienced a similar situation such as *Parents Without Partners*. In effect, they use the *angry feelings* as a launching pad for developing new, positive life habits (Fisher, 1981).

Unhealthy family scenarios are characterized by a lack of support and resources to deal with the anger. Possibly lacking in past experience, the family may simply be reaching out for help from others through their negative anger. Unfortunately, the anger can and often does embed the family in circular patterns of *blame and shame* relationships. Tragically, family energy is absorbed in internal arguments and confrontations. Or, individuals may totally withdraw from the family arena in an effort to escape the reality of the stressor. The "son" who leaves home to avoid the fallout of alcoholism may simply be creating greater problems for himself and other family members. The reality for most families is a combination of healthy and unhealthy responses to their feelings of anger. The deciding influence is how people develop patterns of relating their feelings to reality in positive ways, as best they can (Bradshaw, 1988).

Healthy family scenarios point to the problem solving skills of families as a key to their transforming shock and anger into productive behaviors. The fourth stage of patterning in special needs families is the *appraisal stage*. All special needs families utilize some appraisal strategies in responding to critical situations. Langer (1983) notes that effective appraisal involves the use of mindful planning while mindless actions are more indicative of poor coping skills. Family scenarios depicting continuing cycles of pathological behaviors reveal a mindless, chaotic system that is eventually internalized as the accepted way of living. In contrast, healthy families project a hopeful response that they will survive the situation. They tend to be more active in pursuing positive features of the situation (Stinnett, 1979).

Scenarios depicting healthy family responses to critical problems point to *the family's ability to gain mindful insight into their situation and to assess it in some rational manner* (Swick, 1984). In other words, they accept the reality of the stressor in an active way, pursuing possibilities that enable them to regain a semblance of harmony in their lives. The first part of this process is an awareness and realization of one's context. The mother of a handicapped child states it well: "Once I realized that being angry at the world only made me and my family miserable did I see that I had to step forward into the world once again." The second part of this process involves the family in assessing the situation and determining some general direction by which they can once again acquire the power to function effectively. For example, Mrs. Johnson had decided that taking care of her sick mother was so intense that other family relationships were being neglected. In assessing the situation with her husband, they arrived at a point of looking for an acceptable alternative. They established a new direction (through open and honest communication) for dealing with their highly stressful predicament.

The fifth stage of special needs family patterning is one of *planning and decision making*. It is this stage of the problem solving cycle that unhealthy families do not use in their response to stress (Curran, 1985). Healthy family scenarios, however, indicate that it is during this stage that plans become specific to resolving their problem or crisis. Families may spend considerable time and energy in exploring and experimenting with possible ways to resolve their situation. Experimenting with new routines, seeking advice, refining old habits, seeking new ways of communication, and realizing these are all steps toward a more functional life are parts of this decision-making puzzle. Gradually, and through many intentional efforts, healthy families arrive at a point where options are narrowed and a pattern of individual and group functioning is clarified (Anderson & Carter, 1984).

The sixth and final stage of special needs family patterning is the *resolution and refinement process*. While there is never a permanent resolution to any life situation, special needs families arrive at a *workable life pattern*. This return to some form of equilibrium is essential for family functioning and for the integration of new and acceptable family roles, and for the formation of functional relationships with work, school, and other community groups (Anderson & Carter, 1984).

The process of resolution is continuous as families face many changes, life adjustments, extra-family stress, and individual growth patterns. Indeed this process of change is integral to healthy family life. The refinement of family dynamics occurs best when the members are cognizant of the origins of different stressors and have some skills for dealing with them in proactive ways (Swick, 1984).

A rejoinder on the *scenario of pathological families* is essential. Pathological family systems appear to lack any useful control skills by which they might regroup to establish a stable framework for resolving their crises. Unable to gain an awareness or realization of their special predicament, such families are absorbed in a cycle of chaos and eventual burnout. Walsh (1985) notes that dysfunctional families seem to either rigidify their system or fall prey to chaos.

> An escalating spiral of changes may produce a runaway effect, so that the conflicts and confusions inherent in the transition process result in chaos. At the other extreme, the threat to systemic equilibrium may lead to a homeostatic rigidity, characterized by a rejection of change and a retreat from reality demands for accommodation (Walsh, 1985, p. 253).

While healthy families appear to use crises as *growth points*, unhealthy families seem unable to rise to a level of proactive functioning. Understanding the systemic nature of family response to crises is or should be a part of the professional's skills. Special needs families can use stress as a part of growth and early childhood professionals can play a major role in this process.

Chapter Six

UNDERSTANDING TRANSFORMED FAMILIES

Clear evidence of the family's response to change (and the resulting stress) is present in the various transformations that have taken place in family structure. Rapid social change accompanied by dramatic increases in human stress have influenced the family, the result has been a major shock to the family system. High divorce rates, child abuse of epidemic proportions, and many other family experiences have influenced the family toward reconstituting itself in new forms.

Four family types that experience some form of *transformation* are single-parent families, foster-parent families, teen-parent families, and step-parent families. Each of these family types represent *systems* that have experienced major changes in who, what, how, where, and when relationships are carried out (Powell, 1989; Schwartzman, 1985; Swick, 1987). For example, in the single-parent family not only is the parent-parent dyad affected but all other relationship patterns are influenced in some way. A similar change in relationships occurs in foster-parent families, but in this case it is the addition of a new family member that influences the family's context. While the emphasis in this chapter is on the transformations that particular family types experience, other families (as affected by major internal and external events) also experience this process of transformation. AIDS, Chemical Dependency Syndromes, and Abusive Pathologies, as they happen within families, bring about intensive transformation (Clay, 1990; Edelman, 1987; Halpern, 1987).

The process of transformation as it takes place in families is reflective of what happens in all social systems undergoing major changes. This process usually involves the following sequence: a major change of some type alters the family's existing system; following the stress of change the family enters a period of healing. Through the healing process, energy is renewed and the family begins the transformation process; the family is empowered to direct energy toward reconstituting itself into a functional system (Schwartzman, 1985). In some cases the trauma experienced by the family is so powerful that the reconstitution process is impeded or even prevented. For the most part, however, families have established *system integrity* and pursue the arduous process of transforming their arrangement into a new, workable form. *Three elements common to all transformed families are:* changes in family structure, rearrangement of family roles, and adjustments in the process of carrying out family functions. The conditions surrounding the family's transformation and the resources available to the family for use in dealing with ensuing changes are major influences on the family's response to the situation (Skolnick, 1991).

Transformed families experience changes in their *structural foundations*, typically in the form of an addition or loss of a family member. The loss or gain of a family member affects all family relationships; causing a shift in the structure of family dynamics (Halpern, 1987). For example, when a two-parent family becomes a one-parent family, the remaining parent (and the former parent) is forced to reconstruct a structure in which family roles are transformed to accommodate the new arrangement. In addition, the children must refine their relationship patterns to account for the new situation. Lines of authority and role-assignments undergo a dramatic change. The loss of a family member forces a redistribution of family assignments and a reorganization of family interaction patterns. A similar process takes place with the addition of a new family member (Schwartzman, 1985; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989).

Whenever structural change takes place, the *roles that people perform* must also change. The parents of a teen-parent, for example, must alter their perceptions of their child to now include perspectives that reflect the new parenting context of the teen-parent (Furstenberg, 1985). In addition, the parents now have the task of constructing a supportive role with the teen-parents, a nurturing grandparent role with the infant, and a guidance role with other family members to help them adjust to the new arrangement. Role changes within the family influence their relationships with other systems. For example, friendship networks that were functional in a two-parent family may undergo alterations in the reconstituted single-parent family. School and work roles may also change in response to family role changes (Hamner & Turner, 1992).

Process behaviors can be viewed as the strategies families use to negotiate their integrity with the environment. Daily functions such as eating, cleaning, transporting family to work and school, conducting rituals, and meeting the emotional needs of each other are altered as families experience transformation (Howard, 1978). Step-parents, for example, are usually involved in an extensive effort to build an emotional system that is responsive to the step-children, their spouse, and their personal system (Bohannan, 1984). Another example of this change in how process behaviors are handled is the case of the single-parent. Single-parents point to *time and resources* as their major concerns because they must process the needs of a family in which two adults were once meeting these needs (Greenberg, 1985). The degree of intensity of the changes families experience influences their responses to the situation. A brief look at the dynamics of families experiencing transformation is instructive of the context in which many parents and children function.

Single-Parent Families

The single-parent family's transformation process revolves around the loss of one of the parents. Death or divorce are usually the causes of this loss. There are exceptions such as when a single person adopts a child. Circumstances surrounding parental loss influence the economic, social, and psychological position of the family system (Cochran & Henderson, 1990; Stinnett, 1979). For example, evidence suggests that single-parents who are divorced are treated less sympathetically than single-parents who lost their spouse due to death (Hetherington, 1979). Divorced single-parents face more difficult economic, social, and psychological adjustments than single-parents who lost their spouse by death. Society tends to be more empathetic and supportive of widows and widowers than of divorcees. This difference in the way people treat single-parents of *different* contexts is beginning to change but divorced single-parents remain in a rather isolated social situation (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989).

The psychological integrity of the single-parent family is clearly related to their position of strength in carrying out the transformation process. For example, a family that has a healthy and positive self-identity is more likely to respond effectively to the challenges of transformation than an insecure and low self-image family. While all families experiencing change undergo stress, the resiliency of families is a major factor in their responding to such stress. The contrast of high-resiliency, low-resiliency families is seen in the work of various case studies. For example, divorces in which the transformation process has been anticipated and related to family needs clearly have a more resilient posture than divorces where bitterness and chaos pervade the relationship system (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). There is no stereotype with regard to how the single-parent transformation process takes place, each family is unique. Yet, research suggests that the economic, social, and emotional trauma of this transformation process brings major stress to everyone involved. Even in the best of circumstances, single-parent families are burdened with unusual challenges (Hetherington, 1979; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989).

Social support in the form of friendship networks, help from relatives, workplace support, and other forms of help are critical to how single-parents respond to the stressors inherent in the transformation process (Garfinkle & McClanahan, 1986). For example, single-parents who have access to *significant others* as supportive helpers are more functional in dealing with family changes than non-supported single-parents (Hetherington, 1979). Support in the form of friendship, child care assistance, health care, job training, and counseling are especially helpful. Economic support is essential to the family during the transformation process. As Wallerstein & Blakeslee (1989) note, without an empathetic and supportive environment, divorce can have extremely negative effects for the total family.

The major structural shift confronted by single-parent families usually involves the loss of one of the parents. However, in an increasing number of cases single-parenthood is the status of the family at its inception. Yet even in these cases, some sense of structural adjustment is present. Where the loss of a parent does occur, and it is anticipated, some form of pre-loss coping is often in process. Advanced signals that a "breakup" is about to occur often are present in the relationship and signal that some major changes are about to take place. In sudden loss cases, the family may enter into a shock phase before beginning the transformation process, in fact some researchers suggest this shock is a part of the process. In responding to the stress of single-parenting, families attempt to use internal and external support sources. Children may be asked to take on additional tasks and relatives and friends sought out to assist in roles previously handled by the absent spouse. Yet in far too many cases single parents absorb the major part of the roles once performed by the other parent (Garbarino, 1982; Greenberg, 1985; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989).

Role adjustments and family process behaviors are two additional issues confronting single-parent families. Role assignments are revised to suit the needs of the new family structure: mother may take on additional work roles, an older child may take on additional household tasks, and the former spouse may agree to continue certain role functions. What is known is that the more congruence that prevails in the new role assignments with what the total family sees as workable is very influential on the family's acceptance and support of each other (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989).

The role-adjustment process is carried on in a continuing, experimental manner until the family arrives at an acceptable system (Kearns & Berger, 1985). Family process behaviors such as eating and meal preparation, household maintenance, social and emotional validation, essential identity rituals, and interaction patterns at school, work, and other social contexts also undergo some form of refinement. Dealing with changes in family dynamics is cited as the most stressful adjustment by single-parents. Usually, the remaining parent experiences this stress the most. They point to the need for more time and more resources as their major needs in dealing with these changes. The stress pattern confronted by single-parents often proceeds as follows: the single-parent must increase her work time to meet the family's economic needs, family expectations actually increase (which is a natural protective reaction of the family), and the single-parent then faces the *double-bind* of trying to meet family needs and work needs not to mention her own personal needs (Greenberg, 1985).

Research on single-parent families points to the importance of the family's support system in empowering the family system to carry out a productive transformation (Hetherington, 1979). The most critical support system is that of the single-parent. The single-parent who has access to relatives, friends, or the former spouse to discuss family adjustments with and to use as a resource on meeting family and personal needs is usually successful in reconstructing family dynamics (Cochran & Henderson, 1990; Garfinkle & McClanahan, 1986). With adequate resources single-parents are able to meet family needs in a positive manner. Extended-family supports also enrich the lives of children by providing a *third party* to share and exchange ideas and social and emotional situations. Community supports such as quality child care, supportive work environments, family centers, and other such supports strengthen single-parents and their children (Garbarino, 1982; Gunnarsson & Cochran, 1990).

Foster-Parent Families

In contrast to single-parent families, foster-parent families must deal with an addition to the family. As is the case with any family system, foster-parent families derive their identity from multiple sources. A critical source of identity is the perception of the family of their boundaries. Foster-families face the challenge of boundary duration and boundary refinement in the sense that in some cases placement of children is temporary. Further, in some cases the children may have *a dual placement*, spending part of the week with their family of origin. Naturally, the life-histories of the children (and of the members of the foster family) also influence this transformation process. For example, a significant number of foster placements emanate from contexts where antisocial family actions warranted the placement. Thus, foster-parenting requires special training, a very high level of commitment, and sensitivity to the unique complexities of the children placed in the family. The addition of a new family member impacts all aspects of the family. Time, space, and existing resources must be reshaped to accommodate the needs of the foster-child as well as the new needs of the family (Anderson, 1982; Barsh, Moore, & Hamerlynck, 1983).

Professional social work agencies have made progress in designing training, placement, and support services that strengthen the foster-parent family ecology. Many agencies use a systemic approach in an attempt to match *children with families* in terms of needs and conditions that will increase the potential for successful family adaptation. Conditions assessed include personal attributes of the child as well as the existing context of the potential foster family. Within the foster-parent family type there are multiple forms of family structure; with an emerging emphasis on preservation of the child's family of origin. Such diversity has prompted training and support programs to direct efforts toward the individual needs of each foster-family (Euster & Noble, 1985).

Further, as is the case with any dynamic human system, the foster-family experiences continued change with the major adjustments taking place during the initial period of adjustment. Social support service agencies have deployed economic, medical, and counseling services to assist foster-parents in dealing with these challenges. These services have not only proven effective in reducing the stress of the foster-family but have influenced the long-term relationship patterns within the family (Howe, 1983).

Structural adjustments in the way children are placed and in the manner in which the natural family/foster family relationship is nurtured have increased the viability of foster care situations. The goal of *permanency planning, as it is now emerging, is to create situations that support the well-being of everyone involved.* The use of short-term placements to support family rehabilitation combined with family preservation strategies are focusing on a new ecology for foster care (Howe, 1983).

Regardless of the duration, foster-parent families must restructure their family system to accommodate the child's needs, and to establish a system in which the child can be integrated into the family's identity. Two conditions that influence this restructuring process are the *readiness of the foster-parents* to create conditions for building a trusting relationship with the child (this condition is part of most foster-parent training programs), and the child's proclivity toward accepting the parents as meaningful and caring adults. In the best of situations, the structural changes that take place create some stress in the system; notably this stress usually relates to relationship formation, sharing of resources, and redefining the time-space context of the family (Euster & Noble, 1985). In cases where a trusting relationship exists, the negotiation of the stress is typically productive.

Unfortunately, many children in need of placement have not experienced trusting relationships nor have they had access to family arrangements in which sharing, empathy, or sensitivity were predominant (Howe, 1983). In such cases foster-parents spend considerable time and energy in attempting to construct a setting and a relationship process that nurtures in the child the needed self confidence for promoting positive parent-child and related family dynamics.

Role changes that occur in foster-parent families are centered around the *changed dynamics* in the family. For example, one parent may concentrate to an extreme on supporting the foster-child to the neglect of another family member. Or, the stress may relate to social and emotional changes that are directly related to the addition of a new family member. Communication is the key to handling these role changes. Given the proper training and supportive conditions needed, foster families are able to handle this transformation process effectively.

Teen-Parent Families

Estimates now place the percentage of newborns that are born to teen-parents at twenty to thirty percent (Edelman, 1992). Teen-parent families function in various contexts: as a part of their existing family, within the family context of a friend or relative, in temporary shelter homes, or in a family system that they have established. In varying scenarios, teen-parents may be single, unmarried but in a joint parenting arrangement, or married. Beyond these context issues, teen-parents must relate to their personal/developmental situation. Developmentally, teen-parents are in the midst of *identity formation* and the demands of parenthood add a very stressful condition to this period of life. In a cognitive sense, teen-parents may be bound by concrete-operational thought and may not perceive many parenting roles as a part of their mental framework (Rogel & Peterson, 1984).

Given the complexities of negotiating parenthood within the pressures of a peer-oriented culture, teen-parents appear to have more difficulties handling the transformation process: establishing positive family relationships, acquiring needed education and training, developing a secure economic situation, carrying out essential parenting roles, and achieving a meaningful role in the community (Furstenberg, 1985; Miller, 1984). Teen-parents also experience a higher rate of birthing problems, have more low birth-weight babies, and are more prone to child abuse (Thompson & Hupp, 1992).

There are many teen-parents who are productive in the parenting and family role. Conditions that appear to foster productive teen-parenthood include: a high level of social and cognitive maturity in the teen-parents, a positive relationship between the teen-parents and their parents, a supportive school-community system that encourages their continued educational development, and the involvement of teen-parents in parenting courses (particularly as related to prenatal and maternal/child health) (Furstenberg, 1985). Teen-parents report their major problems revolve around the negative perceptions family and friends have of them and the lack of support needed to deal with the issues of parenthood (Cataldo, 1987).

Personal and family stressors connected to being a parent influence particular changes in teen-parents: alterations in self-image, changed relationship patterns with their parents and siblings, adjustments in school, work and peer relationships, and refinements and/or changes in the spouse-friend relationship. It is within this construct of changed relationships that teen-parents must shape their new family boundaries. The dynamics of these changes are such that they hold the potential to facilitate or impede the development of teen-parent families (Furstenberg, 1985).

In some cases the teen-parent family becomes a *family in preparation*, nested within the contexts of their families. Such an arrangement does provide the security of a guarded ecology while they acquire the skills for emerging into a fully functioning family system. For example, Anita is at home with her parents and remains unmarried. She handles many parenting tasks but is not economically self-sufficient. Her friend Charles visits daily and helps with many child care duties. He is the father of the child and he and Anita plan to marry as soon as they finish high school. Charles, Anita, and their child are a family-in-the-making. Through support from their families, they are able to acquire needed parenting skills within a fairly stable and supportive system.

Not all teen-parent families have the support system available to Charles and Anita. Some teen-parents find themselves isolated from their families and the environment that once served as their security. In yet other cases, teen-parents enter parenting with only negative memories of their own childhood. In high-stress, low-support environments many teen-parents experience a form of system overload, resulting in various family pathologies (Rogel & Peterson, 1984). The dynamics of transformation that teen-parents experience calls for an empathetic support system in which help from family and friends (as well as community agencies) is linked to the new life they are trying to shape.

The most dramatic role adjustment experienced by teen-parents is the *realization of parenthood and all of its responsibilities.* The transition from adolescence to adolescent parenthood requires the adoption of new views of self as related to child care and one's new position in life. The teen-parent is no longer a child in the family but now assumes the dual roles of emerging young adult and parent. Role relationships with peers, in school, and at work undergo major changes (Miller, 1984).

The self concept and self-other relationships are at the center of role adjustments in teen-parents. They must see themselves as capable and worthy persons who have a secure and useful place in life if they are to handle the transformation process in a productive manner (Furstenberg, 1985). Only from a position of growth and strength can teen-parents negotiate new roles, refine existing relationships, and construct a viable system for developing a family.

Teen-parent families must also create a process by which they can establish the social, emotional, economic, and physical security of the family. Tasks that were once taken care of by others now become the responsibility of the teen-parent. Child care, job security, educational attainment, social and emotional relationships, and constructing family identity are some of these process behaviors. In most instances teen-parents have had little experience in handling these processes. Moving from a state of dependence to total independence creates a stressful situation for both the teen-parent family and the family of origin. The context is even more stressful in the case of the single, teen-parent family and even more precarious when the single, teen-parent family has no support system (Miller, 1984).

Family counseling, parent education, school support programs, and appropriate economic, medical, health, and educational supports provide the best means of empowering teen-parent families for responding to the stress inherent in their life transformation (Fisher, 1981). Regardless of how the teen-parent family is eventually structured, the process by which that structuring occurs needs to be as positive as is feasible. The self concept of teen-parents, their child, and their parents is best supported through positive interactions with each other. These interactions are more likely to be positive when the parties involved have guidance in dealing with the complexities of teen-parenting and access to supports that reduce stress in key areas like child care, educational attainment, and economic resources (Furstenberg, 1985).

Step-Parent And Blended Families

The rise in the nation's divorce rate created a situation likely to stimulate a dramatic rise in step-parent and blended families. Indeed the remarriage rate of divorced couples has prompted a large increase in this family type (Halpern, 1987). In addition, many single, never-married persons marry into step-parent families. There are many *combinations of step-parent and blended families.* The family, for example, may have a first-time mother but a third-time father—creating the possibility for *mothering three families* for the first-time mother.

Step-parents inherit an *image problem* that has been nurtured through historical accounts that portray the step-parent as the evil invader of the family's turf (Bohannan, 1984). The term *step-parent* implies that one is once removed from the family system. This implication provides insight into a challenge faced by all step-parents: *How to become a part of the family in a holistic sense.* In a similar context, step-parent families are challenged to transform their system to accommodate the style of the new parent (and in the case of the blended family—to accommodate the styles of both parents). Only when the transformation process is seen as a family affair can steps be taken to create a context where everyone's needs and talents are supported (Pogrebin, 1983).

In some cases, step-parents are members of two families (the family they once resided in and the step-parent context they now inhabit). And in cases where both parents had prior families by a first marriage, the stress of adjustment may be even more complex. The challenge faced is one of creating a psychological framework for being a part of at least two different and distinct family systems. Given the many relationship patterns that can emerge in two different families it is no surprise that step-parents report that stress due to an overload of family responsibilities is their major problem. This overload is usually related to financial, social and emotional, and related stressors that become excessive because of the number of people involved and the complex histories that often exist in these families (Visher & Visher, 1979; Powell, 1989).

Step-children also face some unique issues: developing a relationship with the step-parent, redefining their relationships with their original parents, maintaining a positive self-image throughout this transformation process, and refining their interactions with peers and others in light of their transformed life context. The key to how step-children respond to these stressors is highly related to the behavior of the adults involved in shaping the relationship patterns that comprise the changed family system. The more positive these relationship patterns, the more likely children are to handle the stress productively (Bohannan, 1984).

Multiple system changes are inherent in step-family relationships. These typically revolve around the dyads of the step-parent to parent, step-parent to child, parent-child, and, of course, the reverse dyadic relationships as perceived by the child. Further, the transformation process disrupts previously secure triangles (father-son-mother, for example) and may alter the family's total perceptual orientation. Changes in how space is used, time is organized, and resources are shared are significant aspects of the family's reorganization. For example, a child may have had complete control of television viewing time, but is now forced to share this function with the new family member. Similar issues include discipline, bedtime eating arrangements, peer relationships, and other family rituals. *In some cases this transformation process can actually be healthy.* Consider, for example, the child who found more caring and stability in the *new family* than in his family of origin (Schwartzman, 1985).

Another inherent stress in this process is the step-parent to parent relationship process. Differences in handling money management, daily routines, and child discipline often take months and years to resolve within a transformed family system. A hidden dimension in this process is what preparation may have taken place to smooth the transition from one family system to a new one. Evidence suggests that when such advanced planning has taken place, particularly with regard to the children's place in the family system, many problems can be prevented or minimized (Schwartzman, 1985).

The more disparity between the family of origin and the step-family system, the more stress that seems to emerge within these systems. Added to this stress is the perception that each family member has of the nature and substance of these changes. While role changes are a natural part of the family change process, the more disparate the systems and the less harmony among the parties involved, the more dramatic the stress is on those involved. In the extremes, such disparity (left unchecked), can lead families toward pathological outcomes (Schwartzman, 1985).

The rebuilding of relationships that occurs in step-parent families require the use of planning and communication skills. At the outset, planned family events can help in reaching for some specific roles each person can contribute to the new family arrangement. This same planning and communication process can be used to maintain healthy and supportive relationships with the family of origin. Any rebuilding process takes time for new, hopefully constructive behavior patterns to emerge. A significant element in this process is the perceptual and actual supportiveness that people bring to the new relationship system. To nurture this process, step-parents can promote several *family-building activities:* rituals such as picnics, special meals, family celebrations, and "family time." Practices such as active listening times, family sharing events, joint leisure activities, special spiritual celebrations, and other rituals are also helpful. Successful family transformation seems to be supported best when planning has taken place and when families maintain open and continuing communication (Bohannan, 1984).

Relating To The Needs Of Transformed Families

The early childhood educator can initiate a helping role *by first gaining a sensitive understanding of the context of the family.* Hopefully, the material presented here is a beginning point for this understanding. Tragically, the stereotypes that prevail with regard to transformed families focus on the negative process elements and the potential for dysfunction. While the intent of these portraits is good, they fail to highlight the potential for the development of healthy relationships within transformed families. A sensitive and caring approach will reveal that stress is indeed a part of any family transformation process. It will also reveal, however, that supportive professionals can assist families in reaching for positive outcomes. As James (1981) and Schwartzman (1985) note, with support and guidance, many families experiencing the stress of change are very successful. In gaining a perspective of the family's situation, the helping professional should give special attention to: the major changes that are taking place in the family, the influence of these changes on the family's relationships, the manner in which the family is responding to these changes, and how the family is adapting to the various stressors inherent in these changes.

Some of the more prevalent issues facing transformed families include:

1. Redefining one's place in the family system.

2. Restructuring the social system by which the family functions.

3. Realigning the family's relationships with other community systems.

4. Responding to the heightened stress which comes with major family change.

5. Creating a means for negotiating the development of meaningful relationships in the new family system(s).

Extending from this understanding role, the early childhood professional can influence transformed families *through their relationship activities.* Whenever individuals and families are involved in dramatic change they realize just how vital stability and consistency are to their survival. Transformed families need models of consistency in their external contacts so that a sense of order is realized as an eventual possibility within the family (Walsh, 1985). Providing the child with consistent nurturing is one way of assuring him there is order in the world. Interacting with parents in ways that validate their personal importance to life is yet another example of this consistency theme. Positive, constructive, and consistent teacher interactions with parents and children from transformed families not only sets an example of how to function, but also provides them with a source to draw from in their rebuilding efforts (Fisher, 1981).

Another valuable strategy is to *maintain regular communication with both children and parents.* This is a strategy that should be promoted with all parents, yet the need is particularly strong when families are undergoing the stress of change. The role changes, shifts in family dynamics, and related emotional stress that are so prevalent in transformed families often confuse children and parents with regard to their relationships beyond the family. For example, a child may see the teacher's corrective actions at school in light of the stress at home and consequently develop negative perceptions of the teacher. School-family communication can help to resolve some of this confusion by clarifying what is expected at school and relating these expectations to some of the stress that may be happening at home. Teacher awareness of both the family's situation and of appropriate communication behaviors is critical to relating to the stress that is prevalent in most transformed families. *Nonverbal behaviors such as patience, flexibility, and sensitivity are also vital to being a supportive part of the family's system.* Taking time to focus on family strengths, especially during times of family vulnerability, is yet another tactic for promoting their self-confidence (Swick, 1984). Making it through the process of transformation is eased by the supportive actions of others.

Perhaps one of the most needed and yet often overlooked ways of helping transformed families is the *activation of their support people.* Friends, neighbors, and relatives can play a very positive role. Often times these support people need suggestions on how to relate to families under stress. Informal contacts with them, encouraging them to keep in touch with the family and to be supportive of them can influence the entire healing process. Neighbors who provide needed child care assistance, relatives who act as good listeners, and close friends who provide reassurance to the family on their essential goodness may well provide the psychological nutrients that enable stressed families to respond to problems in a constructive and healing manner (Swick, 1985; Powell, 1989).

Beyond the informal and natural supportiveness that resides in kin and friendship networks are the services available in more formal community agencies. The simple sharing of information on available services or helping a parent connect to a particular agency can make the difference in how families respond to change. A teen-parent may simply need to know how to take care of their child's medical and health needs. A step-parent may need ideas from a counselor on how to handle the transition role—for self and for the child. Many single-parents are in need of information on social, recreational and educational activities that they can use to involve the family in wellness efforts.

The early childhood professional has more contact with transformed families than perhaps any other individual or group. We can be a strong and positive influence on the family's system; supporting them through information, services, communication, validation, and many other activities. Our sensitivity to the family's situation is best realized in our actions that promote their strength and support them in their search for growth.

Chapter Seven

AT RISK AND DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILIES

Throughout history the demands of society have often exceeded the resources of individuals and groups, particularly the family. This is especially the case when social, cultural, and technological change occur rapidly, leaving little time for families to adjust and cope. In recent history, the excessive demands that have accompanied new hopes in technology, industry, and education have created a dissonance between societal norms and what the family can achieve. Factors like an increase in educational expectations, a need for greater family involvement in the economy, and the increased mobility of people have influenced the kinds of stress families experience (Popenoe, 1988).

It is common for families to adapt their modes of living when change is rapid and intense. Indeed this diversification might be seen as a healthy response, a type of seeking out for alternative ways of relating to the change process. Yet this disruption of lifestyles also brings with it an inevitable overload on families. While many families are able to absorb and even capitalize on the changes in their environment, others are especially vulnerable to these stressors. In effect, *when the level of riskness is chronic and excessive,* the family system is at risk (Swick, 1991). If the conditions of risk are not addressed in an effective manner, the potential for family dysfunction is high. The constructs of *at risk* and *dysfunction* have particular significance to the early childhood educator's relationships with families. It is during the early, formative years of family life that risk and dysfunction are most likely to surface, and can be most effectively prevented or resolved (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Ford & Lerner, 1992). These constructs need to be fully understood within a framework that promotes a proactive and nurturing relationship between parents, children, and their helpers.

Families At Risk: A Framework

The construct of risk has evolved within the structure of many disciplines, particularly psychology, ecological studies, and family life research (Swick, 1992). The term "at risk" is appropriate when used to signify that possible harm may come to the individual or family with regard to the nature of particular stressors. This construct recognizes that at different points in the lifespan all individuals and families are in at risk situations. It also is inclusive of the dynamics that are present in person-environment relationships. Perhaps most significantly, the construct of at risk is actually a proactive paradigm, focusing on conditions that empower persons and families through an ecological emphasis that is both analytical and synergistic (Caldwell, 1989; Garmezy, 1992).

Comprehensive analyses of children and families under stress indicate that certain conditions put families at risk (Thompson & Hupp, 1992). It has been consistently noted that conditions such as extreme poverty, illiteracy, low-support environments, and abusive relationships place individuals and families in harmful predicaments (Garbarino, 1982; Schwartzman, 1985; Thompson & Hupp, 1992). It has also been noted, however, that particular family and community strengths such as economic viability, social networking, adequate human services, and high access to literacy are empowering forces that often preclude the stressors that are the major sources of risks (Burchard & Burchard, 1987; Swick, 1991). Critical to an empowerment mode for families is their ability to at least maintain some balance among the needs-resources quotient in their thinking and behaving. Without adequate sources of power, risk factors can erode the family's system for carrying out development and learning (Honig, 1986).

The power of unattended stressors is greatest during the early childhood years. It is during this formative period of development that families are most vulnerable to stress. Tragically, many families are not provided the resources (particularly time and support) needed for establishing the nurturing relationships so badly needed for meaningful living (Blazer, 1989). When conditions threaten the family's self-esteem, support system, their sense of efficacy, and impede their overall wellness, the potential for dysfunction is heightened (Swick, 1987).

Recent paradigms in the field of human development and learning provide broader perspectives for understanding the factors that create risk conditions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Powell, 1989; Thompson & Hupp, 1992). In the past, most family studies focused on dyads and were restricted to examining two or three cause-effect factors. More recent ecological perspectives focus on multiple influences (and the dynamics of these influences) as they occur within the many dimensions of family relationships. In this ecological perspective, the meaning of at risk takes on a changing nature, related to many possible combinations of events as they interact to influence individuals and groups. It also provides a foundation upon which empowerment strategies can be designed to enable children and families to develop more meaning and control in their lives (Dunst, Trivellte, & Deal, 1988). For example, it is now evident that parent education and family support strategies can positively influence families. Literacy, counseling, and preventive health care practices are other strategies that have also been effective in empowering families.

The recognition that the person-environment system contains the power to create risks or to promote empowerment has also prompted a broader understanding of the levels of risk that can emerge in family dynamics. While not fully understood, the risk-empowerment dynamics present in all relationship systems provides a structure for exploring the intricacies of this process. Swick (1991) presents a three-level framework for understanding at least some of the dimensions of the risk construct as it has been observed to evolve in some family systems. *The three "levels of risk" are low, moderate, and high.* Low-risk is defined as a situation in which the family's integrity is not seriously threatened. While one or two risk conditions may be present they are not intensive and do not dominate the family's energy. Significantly, in low-risk scenarios the family does not perceive the stressors as insurmountable problems but rather as elements they can control through mindful action. Moderate-risk implies that two or more stressors are present, pervasive, and do represent a distinct threat or potential danger to the family. In this scenario the family perceives the stressors as a serious issue (or family behaviors may reflect that a serious issue is prevalent in their system) but not as a crisis or totally debilitating condition. High risk indicates the family is indeed experiencing events that place their integrity at risk (Swick, 1987, 1989, 1991). Children and families in the highest risk category usually are confronting multiple stressors that combine to influence their lives in a pervasive and debilitating manner.

The interactive nature of the risk process, as it develops in families, is evident in this levels delineation. High risk, for example, is usually the outcome of continuing neglect within the person-environment system as carried out within the family and community (Garbarino, 1982; Thompson & Hupp, 1992). That is, where families are inattentive to the nuances present in their relationships and their environment they face a risk of promoting stress. Healthy families tend to isolate and resolve stress through preventive, empowering lifestyles *that are supported in the community*. The dynamics of risk are complex and yet open to assessment and control. Unhealthy lifestyles seem to feed the risk process, particularly where community support structures are weak. Empowering community systems (health, education, economic viability—as examples) have a clear impact of reducing the potential for family risks.

Families And Dysfunction

When *FEAR* is the presiding element in the family's relationships, dysfunction has (or is very likely to) emerged within the system. While families in trouble function, in most cases their patterns of functioning are ineffective. Their relationships are usually characterized as fearful, distrusting, filled with anger, and representative of distorted ideas about development and learning. In some cases perpetual crises are used to maintain some form of family survival, in effect protecting everyone from the realities of dysfunction (Kagan & Schlosberg, 1989).

The basic emotional and social relationship patterns of the family provide the "system" by which functionality and wellness are promoted, refined, and maintained (Schwartzman, 1985). These patterns of relating to each other provide the means by which the family learns to interrelate with the change-continuity process. These interactions occur within dyadic, triadic, and holistic relationships. They establish the basic framework in which roles and structural activities are defined, refined, and enacted.

In healthy families, nurturing relationship patterns are established through sensitive and responsive interactions. Roles and structural elements are well-defined and yet permeable enough to allow for flexible responses and for an equitable sharing of power. Change is dealt with through problem-solving strategies that aim to distribute responsibilities and freedoms throughout the family as appropriate to role, context, and the person's developmental status (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). In healthy, functional families the relationship process is responsive to stress through flexibility and through appropriate role assignments. It is not a problem-free system but rather is an environment where change is seen as natural and controllable.

Unhealthy family relationship patterns (which often lead to dysfunctionality) are characterized by their rigidity, insensitivity, and role distortion (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Abnormal levels of emotionality along with excessive concentrations of power in one or two family members creates a volatile system, one in which the change process is resisted and often denied. In contrast to the *balance of power* found in functional families, an extreme imbalance of power is often present in the dysfunctional system. Too much is expected of one or two persons and usually these expectations are based on inappropriate role assignments. In effect, dysfunctional families create excessive stress within their system of relationships by the way they rigidify roles and distort the balance of power. The system is out of balance before external change is ever engaged. Naturally, this imbalance is heightened when external and internal change dynamics become interrelated (Kagan & Schlosberg, 1989; Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

Dysfunctionality in families appears more often when risk factors and risk conditions are chronic and extreme. The intergenerational link within many families of chronic dysfunction is indicative of the power of enmeshment when it acquires a hold on family relationship patterns. For example, abusive and antisocial patterns of family living seem to promote an intergenerational lifestyle unless they are disrupted (Magid & McKelvey, 1988; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Early childhood family-oriented programs that focus on empowerment can disrupt this destructive pattern through education, support and enhancement strategies (Swick, 1991).

Family Risks As Context Factors

There are many factors that have the potential to create a *context of risk* in families: poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition, inadequate health care, weak support systems, unemployment, intra-family stress, and multiple combinations of these and other factors (Caldwell, 1989; Dimidjian, 1989; Thompson & Hupp, 1992). The success story of the risk syndrome is that so many families respond effectively to the situations they confront. Each family, even families enmeshed in high levels of stress, present tremendous creative energy in responding to different stressors. Thus, *it is critical that as family helpers we remain sensitive to the inherent goodness that exists in every family* (Blazer, 1989).

The goal is to understand what is happening to families in high-stress situations and to then create strategies that are supportive of their efforts to resolve or modify these risks. The *understanding aspect* of this process begins with insight on the *context and behavior indicators* so prevalent in the lives of children and families who are at risk.

Context indicators are those factors that permeate the environment of families who are experiencing (or likely to experience) stressors of a risk nature; particularly as they influence their social and emotional relationships (Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Thompson & Hupp, 1992). For example, an alcoholic family is in a context that has many high-stress indicators: impaired social and emotional relationships, passive/aggressive individual and group behavioral tendencies, poor family and work functioning, and often a *sense of isolation* from the surrounding environment. Some of the most common at risk context indicators present in families during the early childhood years are: physical pathologies, malnutrition, drug-impairment, chronic health problems, extreme poverty, chronic isolation, severe family dysfunction, illiteracy, high-risk living conditions, and chronic unemployment (Hamburg, 1992; Thompson & Hupp, 1992).

These context indicators usually interact with each other as developmental influences on the family (Dimidjian, 1989). It is important to note, however, that the presence of these indicators alone does not equate with at risk family conditions. Rather, depending on the nature of the indicators (substance, severity, and longevity) and the sources of stress underlying them, and on how they are responded to, a condition may exist or emerge to negatively influence the family (Burchard & Burchard, 1987). Some context indicators are more powerful than others, especially at particular points in the life-span. For example, while malnutrition is always a negative stressor, it is most damaging during the early years of life (Woolston, 1991). This same observation has been noted with regard to the formation of social and emotional health in children and families (Swick, 1987). As Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Pence (1988) note, the family is most vulnerable during the formative period.

Another significant but often overlooked process that occurs in young families under heavy stress is the short-circuiting or destruction of their social learning system (Caldwell, 1989; Dimidjian, 1989). When young families are constantly responding to chronic stress they have little energy or faith for creating a proactive and nurturing ecology. In such contexts, families who are at risk develop behavior patterns that may be destructive of their integrity and are often dysfunctional (if not antisocial) within the larger environments of school, work, and neighborhood (Schwartzman, 1985).

Research has noted several **behavioral indicators** of at risk family situations: severe developmental delays, poor self-image, cognitive dysfunction, socioemotional distortion, and related antisocial behavior syndromes (Magid & McKelvey, 1987; Rutter, 1987). As in the case of context indicators, the severity and persistence of behavioral indicators is the key to their being symbolic of riskness. For example, every person has periodic self-doubts; it is the presence of continuing and pervasive self-image problems that is cause for concern. Where a parent is so insecure that he or she fears rejection at every turn in the life-course, their self-esteem is clearly at risk. Likewise, an isolated family conflict is probably an indicator of healthy change taking place. Yet persistent and pervasive family confrontation is typically indicative of dysfunction (Bettelheim, 1987).

Context and behavioral indicators interact in multiple ways, creating an ecology which may promote a continuing spiral of riskness (Dimidjian, 1989; Swick, 1991). Some examples of the relationship between context and behavioral indicators (as they emerge in at risk situations) provide some insight into the complexities of the family riskness process. Magid & McKelvey's (1987) description of *Antisocial Personality Syndrome* is one of the better examples of this concept. In this syndrome, the individual's antisocial behavior (aggression, theft, abuse) is symbolic of a context that includes various debilitating stressors such as detachment, neglect, abuse, poverty, and illiteracy. What emerges from an initially small set of stressors is *a spiraling ecology of risk* in which antisocial behavior becomes the norm and continually erodes healthy behaviors that exist, thus further promoting additional antisocial behaviors.

A similar process has been noted in the environment of "crack babies" (Shores, 1991). Not only is the prenatal cocaine-exposed infant subject to the biological impairments that often accompany this syndrome but he or she is also likely to experience the many other context and behavioral maladies that seem to permeate the drug environment of the parents. In effect, the entire family is afflicted with the stressors that pervade the drug culture. It is now clear that particular risk areas are most threatening during the early childhood years.

Key Risk Areas As Indicators Of Family Stress

Research in early childhood education indicates that eight risk areas have a profound impact on the lives of young children and families: ineffective parenting, inadequate home learning environments, illiteracy, poor health care, unemployment, child/family abuse, malnutrition, and chemical abuse syndromes (Garbarino, 1982; Thompson & Hupp, 1992).

In almost one third of the nation's families, **poverty** is the major stressor that instigates these key risk conditions. It not only reduces the family's ability to respond to its own basic needs but increases the potential for exposure to other risks such as malnutrition and poor health (Garmezy, 1992). In isolation, poverty can be confronted through social and educational strategies. It is the interactional nature of poverty with other ecological and developmental risks that degrade family living in intense ways. In a rapidly changing economic system the poverty syndrome is embracing more families, particularly in terms of increasing their stress through chronic unemployment and poor housing (Dimidjian, 1989).

In far too many cases the poverty syndrome (like other risk syndromes) produces multiple behavior indicators in children and parents: severe developmental delays in children; dysfunctional adult behaviors as in alcoholism; and overall family dysfunction (Swick, 1991). Risk syndromes appear to have their most degrading influence on the very source of the family's strength, their collective relationship system. It is through the *relationship system* of the family that stress is mediated. When this system of coping is seriously damaged, family strength is eroded. Clearly, parental competence to respond to risk factors is paramount.

Ineffective parenting is the most serious and damaging risk that young families can experience. *Parenting is the key mediator* by which families carry out problem solving, relationship formation, and affective and instrumental processes integral to their development. Swick (1987) describes four elements that comprise parenting (parent integrity): self-image, locus of control, self-other relationships, and social support. Weaknesses in these integrity sustaining elements can impede parental competence. In turn, these elements can affect the family's learning environment. For example, low self-esteem in parents has been observed as highly related to various family dysfunctions such as abuse and neglect. Not surprisingly, low self-esteem in parents is usually interrelated with other factors in their context: low support, illiteracy, and personal experiences with abuse and neglect (Edelman, 1987). A cycle of interactional (and potentially intergenerational) experiences (neglect-insecurity-ineffective parenting- and other at risk indicators) appear to create a *culture of riskness*. Low-resource family environments and abusive family situations are prone to generate more abuse and dysfunction (Schorr & Schorr, 1988). As Fraiberg (1977) notes, dysfunctional parents focus their energy on "defining themselves"; trying to sort out the underlying sources of their insecurity and chaos. Such self-absorption leaves little room for responding to the needs of others in an effective manner. Lacking in proactive social and cognitive skills, ineffective parents tend to respond to stress in irrational ways. In effect, a circular pattern of incompetence is continually regenerated (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

Inadequate home learning environments (which are interrelated with ineffective parenting) is another key risk often present during the early childhood years (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Edelman, 1987). While there are discrepancies in any home learning arrangement, families at risk often have serious problems due to major discrepancies in areas such as: literacy resources, rituals for nurturing healthy relationships, family attitudes toward learning, social linkages for pursuing learning, needed resources for promoting wellness, and strategies for sustaining a positive social and emotional family system (Stinnett, 1981; Swick, 1987; Thompson & Hupp, 1992). It is important to note, however, that many at risk families effectively mediate this source of stress through creative interactions with their environment. *The strength of parental competence can be a positive antidote* to the sources that may promote inadequate home learning contexts (Swick & Graves, 1986). For example, work with low-risk families has found that a lack of literacy materials in the home can be mediated through supporting stronger leadership in parents (assisting parents in creating a literacy oriented environment), and by involving them in continuing parent education experiences (Swick, 1991). Other parent involvement/family support programs have noted various improvements in parent behaviors: accessing community resources better, utilizing school resources for home learning, developing regular literacy habits in the family, and interacting with each other more on literacy activities (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Rich, 1989).

Illiteracy, ineffective parenting, and inadequate home learning are connected. Illiteracy functions as a central element of continuing and intense family stress (Dunst, Trivette, & Deal, 1988). The inability to use cognitive and symbolic processes in operative modes limits the individual in problem-solving skills, erodes self-confidence, impedes interpersonal relationships, and ultimately reinforces a circular form of living that is self-destructive (Schaefer, 1985). Unable to create viable communication and support behaviors, many negative indicators of family dysfunction may emerge: abuse, poor learning attitudes, and cyclical behavior patterns of a passive-aggressive nature (Garbarino, 1982). In addition, possible adult outcomes that further this cycle include: persistent unemployment, low self-esteem, lack of parenting skills, and related dysfunctions (Dimidjian, 1989).

Poor health care is a risk factor that threatens the entire family's well-being, particularly during the early years. Poor nutrition, lack of self-care skills, inadequate sanitation, lack of access to health care, and inadequate health education skills create stressors that degrade the family's total wellness (Boyer, 1991). While health care and health status are highly related to other risk factors, they are emerging as universal threats in our society. The U.S. Department of Education (1988) reports that indicators like alcohol/drug abuse, suicide, AIDS, and homicides are on the rise; appearing across all social, economic and cultural groups. Wellness indicators such as physical activity, religious participation, involvement in school enrichment experiences, positive life values, and proactive health behaviors are on the decline among children and adults (U.S. Department of Education, 1988).

Health and wellness are the fabric of strong families and effective societies (Stinnett, 1981). When this fabric is damaged in any family member, the entire family is at risk, at least within the context of their relationships (Swick, 1989). For example, malnutrition and poor health care can create severe stress in the child and in turn negatively influence the family's evolving relationship system (Curran, 1985). Lack of knowledge and skills related to maintaining adequate health care is correlated with serious health problems in young children such as hearing/vision impairments, chronic infections, nutrition-related maladies, and a plethora of social and behavioral dysfunctions (White, 1988; Woolston, 1991). Perhaps the most severe damage to the child and the parent is the emergence of a pessimistic outlook on life. What may initially only appear to be an isolated stress can quickly evolve to embrace the family within a degrading cycle of poor health, family abuse, and antisocial behavior patterns (Thompson & Hupp, 1992).

During the early childhood years **malnutrition** is one of the most serious risks threatening children. Given that nutrition is connected to so many family rituals, this risk area influences many aspects of the family's relationship-building process. *Nutrition and family relationships are interactive forces* that influence each other and all aspects of the family's well-being (Thompson & Hupp, 1992; Woolston, 1991).

The dynamics of risks like poverty and illiteracy create a context conducive for **inadequate job skills,** which often contribute to unemployment and/or underemployment. While the intricacies of such scenarios vary, their negative influence on parental competence and family viability is dramatic (Dimidjian, 1989). Unable to find sustained employment or to project a hopeful future of one's self as a contributing citizen, many parents become enmeshed in a cycle of passive and/or antisocial behavior that further degrades the family (Magid & McKelvey, 1987). For example, research has noted the link between illiteracy/sustained unemployment and antisocial, passive-aggressive behavior syndromes (Wilson & Herrnstein, 1985). Further, the two major risk indicators of intergenerational family dysfunction are illiteracy and a lack of basic job skills. Macrosystem analyses of social program impact on long term improvements in family and community living indicate context and behavioral change are best achieved through literacy, job training/employment strategies, and parent education (Schorr & Schorr, 1988).

Abusive family situations, whether of a self-inflicted nature (chemical abuse) or of a group-sustained structure (child or spouse abuse), place the entire family in a high-risk context (Garbarino, 1982). Indeed the realities of family abuse reveal that these contexts often include combinations of self-other abuse syndromes. For example, drug abuse is clearly linked to other abusive behaviors within the family: disrupting parent-child attachment experiences and preventing the emergence of healthy bonding rituals (Tower, 1989b).

In particular, various chemical addictions, as they are played out within the family, can and often do create a mosaic of problems for everyone. Towers (1989b, pp. 7-8) states:

Alcoholics and drug addicts hurt those around them by destroying family stability, unity, and security. At its worst, alcoholism/addiction can result in loss of income, self-respect, spousal and child abuse, and divorce. For the children it can lead to delinquency, substance abuse, and suicide. At the least, children of alcoholic/addicts will suffer feelings of low self-esteem, shame, fear and loneliness; and they may grow up lacking in the ability to trust and develop relationships with others. It will certainly affect how well or poorly they function in school.

This degrading process is often devastating during the early years. For example, the research on "crack babies" indicates that the mother's addiction is often imposed on the infant; bringing with it several retarding influences: potential brain damage, disruption in the attachment process, neurological damage, and a variety of other debilitating problems (Shore, 1991).

Another addictive type of risk behavior is **child and family abuse.** Parents who themselves have experienced abuse or who are a part of a cycle of intergenerational violence often replay this syndrome in their parenting and marital lives (Bradshaw, 1988). Attributes such as rigid behavior patterns, physical aggression, psychological abuse, severe neglect, and sexual abuse are symbolic of deeply ingrained insecurities, low self-esteem and poor mental health (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). For example, it has been observed that mothers who themselves experienced abuse (or are currently experiencing it) have serious problems in forming healthy relationships with their children. Their lack of an image of how to nurture as well as an absence of a sense of being nurtured apparently block the essential relationship patterns that are necessary for forming attachments (Fraiberg, 1987).

Abusive parents (and abusing families) generate an ecology in which family pathologies, severe developmental delays and/or impairments in children, child and adult antisocial behaviors, and extensive, continuing abuse syndromes are likely to emerge (Thompson & Hupp, 1992). Individual and family dysfunction related to abuse are numerous but the most denigrating include: physical injury cycles, persistent social isolation, and pervasive spiritual erosion. Abusive parent/family contexts appear to create a closed-system in which recursive abuse patterns are modeled, practiced, internalized, and then extended to internal and external family relationships (Cohler, 1984; Gelles & Cornell, 1985). Various studies have described the dynamics of abuse as it influences their family interactions in multiple ways. The pervasiveness of abusive family syndromes is such that it is often observed within intergenerational patterns. It becomes an accepted way of life and even acquires a status among many of the adult perpetrators and victims (Kagan & Schlosberg, 1989).

Families experiencing the stress of the risk factors described above confront the possibility of dysfunction. While risks can be addressed effectively, particularly in isolation or in manageable situations, they can become the fabric of a dysfunctional lifestyle.

The Dynamics Of Dysfunctional Families

The most alarming attribute of high-risk families is the *ecology of despair* that is so often prevalent in their lives. When risk factors become chronic and embedded in a human relationship system that is characterized by despair, powerlessness, isolation and extreme insecurity, the potential for creating *a culture of dysfunction* is very high (Cohler, 1984).

The sources of stress may be varied and chronic, and the available resources for use in responding to the risks are often minimal. The interactive nature (self-other-environment) of dysfunctional situations is indicative of a system trying to survive without the needed resources (Ford & Lerner, 1992). Varying "states" of the person and the environment (and the interaction of these two forces) influence the nature of their response to stress. For example, with limited resources, few options for strengthening their immediate status, and a negative view of life, high-risk families often develop circular behavior patterns (stress-anxiety-conflict-abuse) that appear to insulate them from disaster. However, these behaviors usually erode their sense of efficacy and further embed them in a cycle of dysfunctionality (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

Left unchecked, dysfunctional behaviors can soon emerge as a pattern in which the family's social system becomes disoriented. There are several attributes commonly observed in families where dysfunctional behaviors are prevalent (Ford & Lerner, 1992; Garbarino, 1982; Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

- A fatalistic belief system.
- A low personal sense of efficacy.
- A negative self-image.
- A closed and unresponsive family relationship system.
- A rigid, passive-aggressive cycle of family interaction.
- An impulsive, non-reflective cognitive style of thinking and behaving.
- An isolated and unresponsive social system.
- A spiritual life lacking in meaning.
- A family relationship pattern that is negative, promoting fear and distrust.
- A family ritual system lacking in problem-solving skills.
- A family system in which abuse and antisocial behaviors are prevalent.

These attributes are symbolic of the interactive nature of "riskness and dysfunction," they reinforce each other and promote increased stress and anxiety in families (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). For example, highly impulsive thinking appears to promote chaos if it is without constraints and thus encourages atrophy within the family system. Such a lifestyle tends to create a sense of fatalism. An emergent sense of fatalism fosters an unhealthy reliance on external sources of power and reduces the family's ability to respond to stress. Without a viable system for dealing with stress, families can develop dysfunctional social relationships that are extremely rigid and based on unrealistic expectations. This kind of relationship system promotes low and/or negative self-esteem in family members (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

Three primary sources of stress are linked to potential family dysfunction: extreme misconceptions about how families and individuals develop; highly distorted ideas about the roles various family members should perform; and a pervasive sense of fatalism (Anastasiow, 1988; Swick, 1987; Towers, 1989b). When these sources of stress are prevalent, the family's wellness is clearly at risk. They present the elements of an all-too-familiar scenario where the "sources of stress" become stressors unto themselves; creating the basis for dysfunction (Magid & McKelvey, 1988).

The belief that families evolve without thought and responsiveness, and that children develop without guidance is a serious source of stress for many families. While the need for parent and family nurturing would appear to be an accepted practice, it is not an ingrained part of our cultural values. As Bradshaw (1988) has noted, the repetition of dysfunctionality in families over several generations is an outcome of the mentality that recursive relationship patterns are adequate ways of functioning. Within this mind-set, abuse, neglect, and other pathologies can become accepted patterns of living (Dimidjian, 1989; Thompson & Hupp (1992). The pattern of family dysfunction as described by Bradshaw (1988) includes: rigid interpersonal actions, poor self-differentiation, closed family relationship patterns, and punitive-insensitive response styles. These dysfunctional behaviors generate a *culture of suspicion and distrust* that dehumanizes the person and the family.

Dysfunctional family behaviors are learned within the intimate ecology of interpersonal transactions; often reinforced by social and cultural forces present within the setting. Swick (1987) reviews several research strands that describe how healthy relationship patterns are prevented from emerging by the presence of rigid, punitive and unresponsive interactions. In this degrading context, fear and hostility take the place of nurturance; with both attributes igniting further actions of a distorted nature (Magid & McKelvey, 1988). For example, observations of abused children confirm that their escalating passive-aggressive behavior patterns are extended across contexts such as the school (Dimidjian, 1989). Dysfunctional syndromes are usually characterized by shame, guilt, denial of feelings, and punitive responses. In such a context the self is easily disabled, thus blocking the process of differentiation that is integral in healthy development. Healthy relationship patterns (inclusive of love, affection, guidance, and positive role modeling) are critical to the family's development of integrity over the life-span. This requires a family value system that promotes mutuality, trust, exploration, sharing, individuality, and teaming (Stinnett, 1981). Lacking in the needed resources to function in healthy ways, families at risk tend to rely on rigidly defined roles. Instead of a "we" environment emerging through positive and helpful relationships, an artificial and very insecure "I-focused" context takes shape. This self-centered and narrowly defined system impedes the development of family bonding (Fraiberg, 1987).

For example, in cases where family abuse is extreme it has been found that various role assignments are inappropriately identified for particular family members. In a sense, the developmental pendulum is shattered and totally inappropriate roles are assigned to young children. A child may be assigned adult sexual or alcoholic role directions that simply attenuate the adult's distorted lifestyle and create a context for child pathologies (Tower, 1989b). These debilitating and abusive role assignments preclude the growth process (particularly the process of self-differentiation) that must occur if secure and loving relationships are to flourish (Swick, 1987).

In families where role-flexibility is discouraged or impeded, riskness (and then dysfunction) are likely outcomes. For example, one person in the family may subtly be defined as the "buffer," carrying out a protective role for the family from various stressors that arise from alcoholism or other addictive or abusive contexts. In other cases a family member may become "The Person" who absorbs conflicting relationship stressors. Often these role assignments become accepted and expected patterns, embracing the family itself in a rigid and unhealthy scenario of dysfunctional interactions (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). The sources of such rigidity are in the context and behavioral dynamics of daily family rituals. While all families experience stress, dysfunctional families not only experience excessive stress but seem to invite it with a lifestyle that promotes "double binds" and is counterproductive. Swick (1991), for example, observed that high-risk family ecologies were prone toward irrational and negative response patterns; thus extending a simple problem into a set of very complex stressors.

The continuing presence of destructive behavior patterns in high-risk families is indicative of an *ideology of pessimism and negativism* (Baumeister

& Kupstos, 1992; Sigel, 1985). Despair, distrust, and a sense of powerlessness are predominant in most dysfunctional families. These attributes emerge in relationship systems that are permeated with non-support, isolation, extreme stress, and a history of low self-esteem (Bradshaw, 1988). Pessimism and negativism erode the family's spiritual depth and promote an ecology of abuse. Magid & McKelvey (1987, p. 178) note that the potential for abuse and role distortion is very high:

> They have a lot of violence, neglect, and abuse with little likelihood of much bonding. Inconsistency is the overriding characteristic.

They (Magid & McKelvey, 1987, p. 178) further explicate some of the complexities of family role distortions:

> The net effect is change in the child's normal role in the family from that of consumer of resources to one of provider. This new role isn't familiar to the child, who is bound to fail at it. Parents in this situation often react with frustration and aggression.

Clearly, there is a critical need for families to develop viable concepts about the nature of child and family growth and functioning; these "images" of how they should grow are at the foundation of their lifestyle. Past prevention efforts have had sporadic success in promoting family wellness. Yet, the need exists for a more *ecological-empathetic approach* in developing and nurturing a paradigm that empowers families early in their journey. A skeletal framework of some of these strategies are presented in the next section of this chapter.

Empowering At Risk Families

Helping parents and children attain the needed resources to begin their journey in a safe and healthy manner is the foundation upon which strong families develop. Preventing "risk factors" from becoming prevalent during the early years must be a priority of every professional and citizen. Recent reports on strategies for empowering families during the early years focus on health, literacy, quality child care, education, and economic security (Boyer, 1991; Dimidjian, 1989; Schorr & Schorr, 1988; Swick, 1991; Thompson & Hupp, 1992).

Maternal and child health is a cornerstone of the foundation for strong families (Boyer, 1991). The combination of health education, medical, and social resources directed toward universal parent and child health care can be an initial and revolutionary point of family and community empowerment.

Beginning with the education of future parents and extending the process through exemplary prenatal and perinatal care and resources, the tragedy of the low birth-weight syndrome and other birth-related risks can be prevented (Boyer, 1991; Thompson & Hupp, 1992). Efforts also need to be directed toward drug education and AIDS prevention strategies. The immunization of all children against killer diseases must be actualized as a universal human right and responsibility. A healthy start in life is the foundation for family wellness and community stability (Schorr & Schorr, 1988).

Adult and family literacy and parent education are critical elements of an empowerment focus. Literacy is a tool that has proven very effective in partially buffering the negative influences of poverty (Rutter, 1987). Indeed, every community must act to implement the National Education Goal (Goal 5) that calls for a totally literate citizenry (Boyer, 1991). New methods of accessing education are essential to involving at risk populations in acquiring literacy skills. These new elements need to begin with the energy present in the community; that talent that has rarely been recognized or used. This energy must be organized and directed toward productive educational and social activities (Comer & Haynes, 1991). True literacy is represented where people are engaged in setting the direction for their lives. Too often many educational programs have a flavor of non-involvement. An emphasis on total parent/family participation is vital to promoting the desired success attributes: parental competence, high self-esteem in parents and children, assertive social skills, high job potential, positive adult role models, and a lifelong enjoyment of learning (Swick, 1991).

Quality child care is a proven family empowerment strategy (Pence, 1988). High-quality child care programs provide children and parents with an arena for learning, support, and long term stability. Considerable evidence suggests that high-quality early learning and support programs influence an increase in the health, literacy, economic, and educational fabric of young families (Dimidjian, 1989; Swick, 1991). Various incentive strategies need to be implemented within low-income, high-risk communities to promote the creation of early learning and family support services.

Education is the best long-term method for total community empowerment. Schools provide the most logical arena for extending healthy beginnings to the community's developing system. Several changes are needed to provide at risk children and parents with a more meaningful setting in which to pursue education. Comer & Haynes (1991) point to the following as essential steps in creating success-oriented learning centers.

- Remove artificial barriers to children's learning, such as tracking, labeling, discriminative grouping, abusive uses of tests, and other segregative practices. Ungraded, continuous progress systems that support success-oriented teaching and learning strategies should be pursued in all early childhood programs.

- Engage all school staff in continuing professional renewal on working with children and families within a multicultural arrangement. This focus should include emphases on children's cultural talents, use of diverse learning styles as instructional resources, and the deployment of many family-school learning strategies.

- Creative learning environments that are culturally sensitive and responsive to the empowerment needs of all children and families.

- Foster high-success school climates where achievement is expected and nurtured.

Economic security is the source of "family viability" that makes possible the long-term growth of children and parents (Schorr & Schorr, 1988). Poverty, particularly during the family's "start-up" is devastating to its sense of hope. A national economic plan of action that includes economic security and related strategies (income supplements, social supports, and other resources) is essential to family wellness. The wage structure, family benefits, and "job security" potential must be advanced if families are to have a foundation upon which to succeed (Albee, Bond, & Monsey, 1992).

There are additional practices that need to emerge if communities are to contain the needed resources for human empowerment. One of the most effective is the presence of exemplary adults in children's lives. Mentoring, continuing adult-child and parent-child interactions, and events and activities that engage children and adults in enriching and constructive living act as strong reinforcements for family wellness. Informal parent and neighbor social support groups are also quite effective in developing an "adult support system" that can nurture children and parents.

In mapping a comprehensive approach for preventing at risk early childhood environments. Boyer (1991) suggests several interrelated strategies. Here are the key guidelines that are the basis of this approach.

- Every child must have a healthy birth, be well nourished, and be well protected in the early years of life.
- Parents are the first and most essential teachers; all children should live in a secure environment where empowered parents encourage language development and a strong curiosity for learning.
- All children should have access to high-quality preschool care that strengthens their potential for school and life success.
- Family-friendly workplaces should become the norm and be places where families are high priority.
- Television and other "media-based programs" need to promote literacy and wellness behaviors that suggest the value of healthy family living.
- All children need spaces and places for growth and exploration, safe and nurturing neighborhoods are needed.
- Intergenerational living must become a part of the real world in which children develop and learn.

Tackling the challenges associated with empowering at risk families is complex and yet vital to the future. Thompson's (1992, pp. 8-9) admonition is a fitting summary to this chapter.

> Tackling problems associated with poverty is not a challenge for the faint of heart. The time is overdue that we stop shrinking from our responsibilities.Government agencies, business, and universities cannot solve these problems singlehandedly, nor can any of these institutions be absolved of the irresponsibility in the struggle. The 1990s will be the decade of combined efforts to solve societal problems no single field of endeavor can reasonably expect to unravel alone. The results of yesterday's basic science will be today's applied research and become tomorrow's practice. It will be a time to turn difficult challenges into opportunities. It will be a time to take chances tackling problems that are truly important.

Part Three

PARENTING AND THE FAMILY LEARNING PROCESS

As the material presented in the first two parts of this book indicate, *parenting is the key to the family leadership process.* The roles, challenges, contexts, and expectations that parents confront are more varied than ever before in history. Whenever societies experience rapid change, the key players of that society must provide the leadership for negotiating the change process. Indeed, parents are the key players in the global society in the sense that they are children's most intimate and lasting teachers.

The focus of *Part Three* is on understanding parenting within the family as learning construct. This involves early childhood educators in examining their perceptions, involvement, and knowledge of the multiple aspects of parenting as it is carried out in their communities. Far too often we homogenize our concepts of what parents should be, how they should function, and how they should relate to us as professionals. This section of the book hopes to engage the reader in assessing their assumptions about parenting, with the emphasis on promoting an empowerment perspective in our relationships with parents.

Chapter Eight provides an overview of the many roles that parents perform. This exploration includes a look at the personal, community, and family roles that parents carry out over the life span. It also engages the early childhood professional in looking at parenting roles within the current support system available to parents. Ways that professionals can support parents of varying backgrounds, cultures, and interests in becoming empowered are presented.

Perhaps the most critical role that parents carry out is that of teaching. **Chapter Nine** presents the various aspects of the *parents as teacher* role. In particular, it examines the "basics of parenting" as they relate to the critical elements of teaching. Once again, the supportive and educational roles of the professional in helping parents function in comfortable and effective ways in this role are presented.

Closely related to the *parent as teacher* role is the concept of *parenting as learning.* A critical assessment of the "learning" aspect of being a parent is presented in **Chapter Ten.** What are the processes that comprise the learning aspect of being a parent? How are these processes developed within the complex and ever-evolving structure of parenting? What do we now know about these processes and how can we promote them in our relationships with parents? These and other important questions are explored in this chapter.

Ultimately, *parental integrity* is the foundation upon which family leadership rests. The basic elements of this integrity include self-image, personal efficacy, interpersonal relationships (inclusive of support system), and one's developmental status. The dynamics of how these elements evolve in parents and how they can be better supported are the focus of **Chapter Eleven.** The reader is especially challenged to reflect on ways that they might better understand parent behavior as a part of the integrity concept.

The center of family wellness is the healthy and growing parent. Little progress can be made in improving the stability of family life without the intimate and reasoned involvement of parents. Early childhood education professionals face a major challenge in assessing and developing parent-oriented support strategies that empower parents. While this challenge may seem obvious and simple on the surface, it involves a fuller understanding of the cultural and social dynamics in which parenting is enacted.

Chapter Eight

THE MANY ROLES PARENTS PERFORM

A full understanding of the family requires insight into the many roles that parents perform. In contrast to the homogeneous parental context of the past, today's parents find themselves in a system that requires multiple roles, skills, and perspectives. Further, parents today sense that they have less support than parents did in previous generations. There is also a new recognition that what parents do is closely linked to many social issues. With increased expectations and family responsibilities, many parents find themselves overwhelmed in their attempt to carry out parenting roles effectively. School failure, delinquency, and adult antisocial behavior have been linked to pathological beginnings in ineffective family environments. Recent studies have focused on the roles parents perform, how these roles are nurtured or constrained within the larger society, and how parents can be better supported in their efforts to be family leaders (Cowan & Cowan, 1992; Edelman, 1987; Fowler, 1989). Through our understanding of parental roles, hopefully we can develop more parent- and family-sensitive early childhood programs.

The Parent as a Developing Person

The most critical role a parent performs is that of being a developing person. In all of their capacities, parents ultimately rely on their personal skills and values. For example, the research on child abuse indicates that parents who abuse their children are often personally insecure and socially incompetent. The static or dysfunctional parent is a poor guide for the child (Bigner, 1985; Kempe & Kempe, 1978). In contrast, growing parents take time to nurture themselves, relate their needs to the total family, and pursue educational and social experiences that strengthen their identity (White, 1988).

Stinnett (1981) and Swick (1984) note particular indicators that reflect a sense of the competent parent. They have a sense of self and how this self functions within the family and in other contexts. Their self-awareness leads toward continuous improvements through their interactions with other adults and children. Critical to being an effective parent is self-insight and self-renewal (Galinsky, 1987).

As a part of this sense of self, effective parents use the past to learn from and to build on in their search for meaning. They have a sense of purpose that is based on trust, a continuing effort to be positive role models, and on their sense of family and community. Stinnett (1979), for example, found that fully functioning families had parents who used the environment to support everyone's growth. This personal competence that parents bring to the family provides the leadership element that is so critical in problem solving, particularly when families are under stress (Curran, 1985).

The developmental dynamics of the parent as a person provides valuable insight into their parental functioning. For example, very young parents are typically attempting to establish their identity as productive workers. Their success or failure in this endeavor influences their parenting and the family. It also influences how they relate to other community support groups such as the school (Kamerman & Hayes, 1982). Similar dynamics are at work with parents in mid-life, who may be facing job changes, caring for an older parent, or other stressors. In addition, parents experience the personal dynamics of marital and friendship development. These events influence how they parent. Research shows, for example, that parents with a weak support system tend to be less confident in their family relationships (Pence, 1988). Chronic unemployment, illiteracy, poverty, and related constraints negatively influence the parent, both in the personal and in the family sense (Swick, 1987).

Parents behave within a cultural framework that they have developed throughout their lives. Values, interests, and attitudes are shaped through our experiences from childhood through adulthood. Parental values, for example, vary depending upon experiences, interactions with others, and the culture in which they participated (Fantini & Cardenas, 1980). Culture is a powerful influence in parent-child relationships. While some parents will encourage exploratory play in their children, others may see this as a threat to a way of life they cherish. Our understanding of how parents carry out the parenting roles can instruct our relationships with them and their children. To reach the goal of having family-school continuity and harmony, we must be sensitive to the diversity of parent perspectives and use this diversity as a means of enriching the early childhood program (Powell, 1989).

The Parent as a Community Participant

Erikson's concept of *the generative adult* extends our discussion of parenting roles to the broader community setting. Erikson (1959, 1982) notes that all adults have a desire to achieve a lasting influence in their lives. When this need is impeded in serious ways, many adults transfer their energy to antisocial or less productive avenues. Such impotence reduces parental self-image and may influence their family relationships in negative ways. Conversely, a productive (*generative*) parent (one who is proactively involved in the environment) usually has a solid sense of security and has a sense of self-worth that permeates their family involvement in positive dimensions. The continuing development of parents in "community" is significant for everyone in the family; it often leads to a larger and more viable support network and toward a more stimulating family environment (Stinnett, 1979, 1981).

Given the many roles parents might perform in the community, the potential for "overload" is higher today than in the past. Work and community involvement stress can impede family life when it exceeds the available resources of parents. In fact, researchers have noted that parents spend less time in family activities because of the many demands on them that evolve from work and community needs (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Garbarino, 1982; Popenoe, 1988). Other research cites the "latchkey child" syndrome as part of the negative fallout from overly involved parents (Duff & Stroman, 1982). The situation is further complicated by the lack of community support for parents. Stress factors created by job-overload or intense community involvement does influence marital and parent-child relationships negatively. School supports such as extended care, parent education, family networking, and related activities have helped to alleviate these stressors for many parents. Yet there is a larger issue involved: communities need to nurture parents and children if they hope to have generative citizens (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

In contrast to the overly involved parent is the parent who is unemployed, underemployed, or not valued in a role they see as very important. The degenerative parent (one who is suffering from a lack of a productive identity) is often unable to meet family needs. A cycle of human incompetence, once unleashed, can enmesh parents and children in pathological interactions. School support programs in the areas of child care, adult education, health services, and in other areas such as counseling and family development can enable many parents to better cope with these stressors (Swick, 1991).

Beyond their job or career involvement, parents usually carry out many community development roles. They historically have been active in providing community leadership in schools, churches, and civic groups. Parents both contribute and receive in these roles, provided they are in balance with their primary family leadership roles. Social networks, positive role modeling for children, and the acquisition of new skills are just a few of the positive outcomes of this parenting role (Swick, 1984).

A developmental and ecological perspective of parenting is essential for parents and their support team. Parents must interrelate their personal developmental and context happenings with those of the family. At various points in the family's development, parents need to "focus" differently, adapting to the complexities of children's development, family needs, and their own development (Bigner, 1985). For example, parents of infants and toddlers will naturally (hopefully) direct most of their energy to the care and nurturance of the child. As the family develops, parents can and usually do redirect energy toward more community involvement. Indeed quality early childhood education programs attempt to support parents in negotiating these developmental changes through parent education and family support activities.

The Parent as Family Leader

A family photograph presents a holistic and rather simplistic view of family relationships. Yet the personalities behind each person in the family are complex, and handling these relationships, as parents fully realize, is a full time undertaking. Consider, for example, that in any parent-child relationship there is more than the dyadic interactions taking place. Their relationships with others at school, church, work, and elsewhere strongly influence their relationships (Calhoun, 1980). This challenge of coordinating and positively relating to children and others within family relationships highlights the need for human relations education for children and adults. It further substantiates the very demanding but potentially rewarding journey of being a parent. Parent-parent, parent-child, and extensions of these dyads present important challenges to parents, requiring leadership of the highest nature (Anastasiow, 1988).

Parent-parent relationships (or parent-friend in the case of the single parent) are the foundation upon which other family relationships are developed (Bigner, 1985). Thus marital and friendship interactions take on a significant role with regards to parental leadership. Their success in relating to their significant adults (spouse or friend) and their ability to renew and further develop these relationships is linked to their overall functioning as family leaders (Stinnett, 1979). For example, family abuse is closely related to adult pathologies of various types. The early, formative experiences of parents as marital partners serve, in a sense, as a training ground for the skills they refine and then use in family building. Positive parent-parent interactions influence children in the development of prosocial behaviors (Bigner, 1985; Cowan & Cowan, 1992).

Parent-child relationships emerge from the initial bonding of mother and infant and the triadic interactions of mother-infant-father. With healthy family development these "bonds" become more complete and reciprocal, allowing for the development of individuality. Even at birth this relationship is a mutual and reciprocal interaction process. As Bell and Harper (1977) indicate, the parent-child relationship is continuously forming, refining and re-shaping itself. Parent and child influence each other as well as being influenced by the myriad of cultural factors in their environment. It is clear from research that *parents establish the socialization pattern early on in their interactions with the child.* In effect, their leadership in creating a nurturing and secure environment is critical to the family's developing identity. Consider Stern's (1977, 109-110) perspective on this "relationship forming" process:

> If we could capture the essence of the nature of characteristic interactive patterns of any individual infant-caregiver pair, it might be possible, even feasible, to predict and chart the likely course of future interpersonal relatedness. Yet this task eludes us. Both parents and researchers maintain that some temperamental features of infants, such as activity level, remain consistent during development. Furthermore, at a different level, most parents experience that the interpersonal "feel" of what it is like to be with the person who is their child maintains some indescribable yet pervasively recognizable unbroken strain from infancy on, even though the manifestation of this "feel" may change considerably during different developmental epochs.

In effect, the early childhood years are probably more significant for parents in the sense that it is during this period that they build their family socialization system. Four basic parenting roles emerge within this leadership system that are critical: nurturing, guiding, problem solving, and modeling. While these roles are discussed later in the book, their significance is such that they are briefly explored here.

Research related to effective development in young children reveals that parents who form a close relationship with their children are in a better position to provide the various kinds of experiences needed for human competence (Rohner, 1986). The meeting of basic human needs (food, love, safety, security, inquiry) and the development of conditions that promote human competence in children are the substance of the nurturing role. Nurturing infants and young children toward developing security of self and appreciation of others is the "stuff" of intergenerational decency (Gordon, 1976; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). This role does not end with the early childhood period. As middle childhood approaches, parents continue helping children broaden their scope of acceptance and understanding of life by involving them in various community and school tasks related to learning about the connectedness of life. Indeed, many young adults rely heavily on "their parents" for advice and support as they continue to negotiate the developmental journey (Rossi & Rossi, 1990).

The guidance role is vital because children learn productive behavior only when someone of importance shows them through setting limits and by offering alternatives to negative behavior. Zucker (1984), for example, notes that "high risk" families where parental psychopathology is prevalent are prone to promote antisocial, hostile behaviors in children. Abusive and neglectful parenting seem to foster insecurity and anger in children. In such cases, the children seem to wander in search of direction, withdraw into themselves and/or become highly aggressive. Parental guidance promotes proactive living, where children establish rituals of caring, self-discipline, and problem solving (Bigner, 1985).

Probably the most important *problem solving* parents do is in how they handle family relationships. Key skills such as listening, supporting, and creating a safe environment are the most vital problem solving behaviors parents use in life. The management of family schedules, resolving human differences and maintaining the economic and social stability of the internal family network requires time, energy, and great skill. Helping children to see the family's resources as a means for solving problems productively is contributive to long-term prosocial living. Ira Gordon (1976) was certainly perceptive when he observed that it is through family life experiences that children learn skills for later use in solving human problems.

Whether performing nurturance, instrumental, or guidance roles, *parents model a way of life*. The way they behave toward other family members and people in the community sets the stage for what children internalize as modes of living within a social system. Parental example is a powerful teaching strategy. Various research reports support this construct that parental modeling strongly influences how children arrive at a social way of functioning (Fraiberg, 1977; White, 1988).

Parents as Cultural Role Models

Parents are children's most powerful teacher of culture during the early childhood years. By what parents do and do not do they create a set of cultural activities that influence the child's perception of life. What happens in the child's "environment" is filtered through the actions of parents. It is usually through parents that children acquire their initial vision of how people function and of what people value. Prosocial behaviors such as sharing, empathy, sensitivity to the needs of others, teamwork, and constructive problem solving are learned early in the humanization process. When parents model these proactive living skills and expect children to gradually acquire them, positive social behaviors are usually internalized by children (Grusac & Arnason, 1982).

It is during the early childhood years that human beings form their *cultural map* of how life works (Fantini & Cardenas, 1980). This map serves as the framework children (and adults) use to solve problems, interact with others, and to develop and refine their self-image. Children need examples of multicultural appreciation in their family system. They also need nurturance and support as they begin to develop attitudes toward other people, particularly as they begin to relate to the human differences present in the world (Hall, 1984). When children see adults experiencing the diversity of cultures in positive and enriching ways, they have access to good role models. As Bronfenbrenner (1976, 1986) notes, the most powerful school for learning is the ecology each person experiences. All parents and citizens need to assess their homes, schools, and communities to see if they are the kinds of places where children can gain insight into the richness of people from different cultures.

Parents as Nest Builders

Parents must integrate their many roles into what might be called "nest building." Internally, they must shape a support system in which adults and children can interact to create a functional and harmonious way of life. Considering the challenges families face today, this support system must be comprised of adults who are *role-flexible* in that they can function comfortably in many different modes. Fathers, for example, can perform nurturing roles as well as mothers when they are supported in this effort and when it is a natural part of their experience (Lamb, 1979). Teaming among the adult members of the family is not only essential modeling but also helps to create more harmony in carrying out instrumental and affective family roles (Bettelheim, 1987). A strong, parent-initiated and maintained internal family support system is a benchmark of proactive and involved families (Stinnett, 1982). The lack of teaming, harmony, family networking, and poor communication systems create the potential for family pathologies (Cohen, Cohler, & Weissman, 1984).

Parents must also build connecting bridges to other family support systems in order to secure the family nest. Actually, the process of "nest building" begins prior to the birth of the child. Galinsky (1987) notes that parents rehearse various aspects of parenting including the relationship-building processes. In this rehearsal, parents "image" themselves as important people in the lives of their child and develop ideas on how they are going to structure their lives to accommodate the new demands of parenting.

Initially, parents begin this process by refining their relationships within a small circle of intimates, typically relatives and close friends. *The lack of close friends and supporters may well disrupt or even impede parents as they attempt to create a viable family system* (Cochran & Henderson, 1990). A hallmark of this early nest-building process is in parental involvement in constructing a external support system that best nurtures the family in responding to change (Swick, 1991). Behaviors such as information sharing, cooperative child care, informal listening, problem solving, sharing of resources, and socialization with other adults are some of the key aspects of this process (Powell, 1989).

Another important feature of this nest-building experience is the selection of a mentor by the parents. Most parents want and seek an older, more experienced adult whom they admire to fulfill this role. It may be their parent, a favorite relative, or an older friend they have met at work. This person can become not only their "mentor" but an informal mentor and supporter for the whole family (Galinsky, 1987). Parents also seek validation and linkages that reinforce their generativity as persons and parents. The challenges of parenthood create a strong need in parents for validation of their competence. Through close relationships with significant others they hope to find reinforcement and enrichment. They also want to see themselves as contributing members of the community (Cowan & Cowan, 1992).

Through the nest building role parents attempt to create both security and stimulation, thus allowing the family to thrive internally and begin to grow as individuals.

Supporting Parents in Their Human Development Roles

The internal functioning of families is only as effective as available community resources allow. We must find ways to support families as primary caregivers and the parents as the child's earliest and most influential teacher. In the wisdom of Ira Gordon (1976, 126):

> Connections need to be forged across all agencies as services to support rather than to supplant the family. Agency dichotomies and barriers must tumble. We need to build harmony between family, school, health, social, housing, transportation,and work.

Some guidelines that early childhood educators can use in designing supportive, family-oriented programs are discussed here to stimulate a rethinking of our role in making the important job of parenting more feasible. Bronfenbrenner (1979), Gordon (1976), Garbarino (1982), and Galinsky (1987) substantiate "time" as critical to healthy family development. All family members need time to relate to each other in meaningful ways. Yet meeting this need seems almost impossible for many parents who are caught up in systems that lack family sensitivity (Kamerman & Hayes, 1982). An advocacy role we as professionals can play is to sensitize citizens and community leaders to the need for more family support practices.

The strengthening of the family is dependent upon our redefining the role of the father. We must also provide fathers with support in carrying out more inclusive and nurturing roles (Swick & Manning, 1983). Father involvement is critical to so many dimensions of family: maternal support, role modeling for children, and a more "shared" system for carrying out the many instrumental tasks of family life. Fathers can be home room leaders, participate in infant caregiving, serve as tutors, and participate in children's lives in many other ways—as many fathers have so achieved. Community "male mentors" are also needed to counter the large number of children growing up without fathers. Our children need to see a more heterogeneous style of living as they develop and learn.

Intergenerational human resources provide a natural support system for families and schools. Consider, for example, that our children are involved with adults less than any previous generation in history (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Parents and children need support from across the community, particularly with people from different age and cultural contexts. The use of high school tutors, senior citizen volunteers and foster grandparent programs are initial steps all schools can pursue in bringing about more connectedness within family-school-community living. Schools that have used intergenerational and multi-age program designs report that children benefit academically and socially. Parents also report that these programs have enriched everyone in the family (Swick, 1992).

Additional support networks exist in the form of neighborhood cooperatives, preschool educational programs, church-sponsored parent centers, and through the more formal structures of various social service agencies in the community. As James Hymes (1972) indicates, the entire thrust of early childhood education is to bring together all community resources to facilitate parents and children toward becoming effective social members of the community.

Chapter Nine

PARENTS AS TEACHERS

Children learn the essential skills for living during early childhood. Their potential to become significant contributors to society is dependent upon the kinds of experiences they have with their parents, teachers, siblings, peers, and others as they develop over the life span. Learning attitudes, values, and indeed "how to learn" is a process that occurs simultaneously in the home, school, and in various community settings. Building on the idea that learning and development take place in ecologically connected settings, Bronfenbrenner (1979) exclaims that children function best when the family and school are involved in mutually supportive endeavors. Research carried out over the past two decades support this perspective. Studies examining the performance of children in school indicate that those who had positive preschool settings as well as supportive and involved parents do better on academic and social skills than children who lack such positive environments (Bloom, 1981; Dimidjian, 1989; Lazar, 1976; Thompson & Hupp, 1992).

Emerging from the research and study on how children learn best is a not so surprising discovery: *children learn best when significant adults are continuously involved in helping them interpret and find constructive ways to act upon their world* (White & Kaban, 1979; White, 1988). For example, the first skill the infant must acquire is to trust. This occurs naturally when capable and nurturing parents are present. But for many "failure to thrive" infants no such nurturing and caring adult exists (Fraiberg, 1987; Gelles & Cornell, 1985). The role of significant and competent adults is by far the most influential factor in the young child's attempt to become a fully functioning person.

The generative adult, as Erikson (1982, p. 66) points out, is able to care for the people and things he or she has been responsible for creating. He uses the following example to focus on the significance of capable adults in nurturing young children.

> As he lay there with his eyes closed, his wife whispered to him, naming every member of the family who was there to wish him shalom. "And who," he suddenly asked, sitting up abruptly, "who is minding the store?" This expresses the spirit of adulthood which the Hindus called "the maintenance of the world."

Parents: The Child's Most Powerful Teacher

Parents are the first and most prevalent influence in the life of the newborn infant. In these early contacts, parents teach children about how people live through their interactions with them. The nonverbal behavior of parents (for example, when and how they nurture infants) communicates to them more clearly than words. Research indicates that young children seem to place more credence in the examples set by parents than in their words. Learning begins at birth through the many interactions of parents and infants (Swick & Duff, 1979). Indeed, White (1988) says the initial teaching role of the parent is to help the child feel loved, enable them to gain an initial sense of competence, and to create a stimulating and safe environment.

Parents establish the needed atmosphere for learning by creating simple, safe settings in which children can explore, solve problems, ask questions, observe, and interact comfortably with others. Such an environment allows children to act out within a safe setting, imitate proactive ways of living, meet new situations with an emerging sense of confidence, and—when needed—retreat to the security of "family." During this early period of life, parents provide support, encouragement, guidance, and love (Bettelheim, 1987).

Just as important is the role model that parents provide children. When children have opportunities to see positive adult behaviors they have some image of how to function themselves. Brooks (1987, pp. 36-37) explains the dynamics of this process:

> During the early years, the quality of parental behavior is important. Parents who express warmth, happiness, consideration, and respect in their daily handling of the child, who are gentle and respond to children's needs with smiles and humor, help their children to develop a positive approach to life.
>
> From time to time parents need to look at their own behavior through the eyes of their children to see if they are providing appropriate models. A father who is eager to be a good provider so that his family can enjoy life may work long hours at one job or take a second. The children of this father may feel that he is a remote, overworked man who has little time for them rather than a happy, responsible father.

Basics of Parenting

The parenting infants and young children experience represents a "curriculum" that influences them throughout life. When parents talk, sing songs, or gently touch or feed the baby, they are conveying the message: *you are* *important!* In addition, they are facilitating the infant's physical and social development. As parents respond to the needs of the infant, they are giving the assurance of a secure and trusting environment (Stern, 1977).

During these formative years, parents have limitless opportunities to assist young children in beginning the development of their basic human capacities. For example, children learn to talk and develop language facility only *when they have people to converse with, to interact with, and to follow as initial models.* Through verbal and tactile interactions with infants, toddlers, and young children, parents provide a "language model" that is hopefully inclusive of the expressive elements of the communication process (Gordon, 1975). Smiles, hugs, warm holding, and eye contact are among the most powerful elements of this parent role. Rohner (1986) found that parents who were warm and supportive of their children influenced them toward more expressive and creative behaviors.

Parents also teach children to trust or distrust, to love or hate, to feel secure or insecure, to value life itself (all of which are critical skills in the development of conscience). In exploring how parents carry out this process, Swick (1989, p. 108) provides some self-report examples given by parents and helping professionals.

> What is it that parents are or do that enables them to be effective in their role as "trust builders" and "faith educators"? Our discussions continually pointed to: they have positive self-images; a spiritual awareness is reflected in their daily living; an orderly and planned system of human growth is evident in their lives; a clear sense of "teaming" exists in the marital or friendship relationship; and they show love and caring openly; and a sense of inquiry, growth, and commitment is evident in family relationships.

As children grow, parents continue to be their facilitators and leaders. By providing gentle but clear guidance and by being consistent in modeling caring behaviors, parents set an example for positive living. Through their interactions with children (praising, showing, involving, and rewarding), and in responding to children's interests, parents can guide children toward a proactive and supportive understanding of learning (Brooks, 1987).

Further, when parents help children extend their reach through simple but important activities like walks through the park, visits to the store and library, visiting friends, spending time together as a family, and helping them feel special, they are nurturing the seeds of successful learners.

Burton White (1988, pp. 167-169) offers parents the following goals for working with children during the first three years of life:

- Help children feel loved and cared for,
- Help children acquire a sense of competence,
- Help children gain an interest in exploring the environment,
- Help children become delightful, caring, and competent three year olds,
- Help children maintain a balanced interest in themselves and their environment,
- Help children achieve the optimal learning foundations in language, intelligence, curiosity, and social skills.

Parents Perform Many Critical Roles

Parents perform many roles in their journey to nurture children toward positive and healthy development and learning. Not the least, parents are in a very real sense children's *safety network* by caring for their basic human needs of food, clothing, love, shelter, and other needs (Caldwell, 1989). Without the maintenance of secure family settings by parents, very little learning and development can occur. While this role is often taken for granted, it is the foundation upon which children and parents build family life.

Significantly, and also often overlooked, parents must attend to *their personal development* if they are to meet the demanding challenges of parenting and family life (Galinsky, 1987). Swick and Duff (1978, p. 18) discuss this critical role.

> Parents must have a personal life which allows them to explore, enrich, and develop their interests in constructive ways. Parents who appropriately balance their work lives with hobbies, social interests, and other activities not only develop their individual selves but are in a better position to provide their children with models of positively functioning human beings.

As fully functioning persons, parents are able to perform what Burton White (1988) calls the *educational, support, and planning roles* that are critical to fostering in the child a zeal for learning.

The educational role of parents is exemplified in their management of the home setting and later the school-community contexts as meaningful places for children to develop in intellectually and socially competent modes. During the early childhood years parents involve children in many cognitively and socially stimulating activities such as parent-child dialogue, engaging the child in active play, introducing the child to literacy materials, and a plethora of other everyday activities. Later, during the elementary and middle school years parents expand the child's educational world through books, travel, and particular learning experiences. They play the interpretive and connecting roles with the school, providing needed continuity for children and teachers (Schaefer, 1991).

The support role of parents, while often carried out in a subtle and indirect manner, has a very significant impact on the child's learning potential. In reviewing the many tasks parents perform, White (1988) noted the energy parents put into planning environmentally stimulating experiences as one of the most significant. During the early childhood years, parents focus much of their energy on establishing and maintaining a nurturing, safe, healthy, and secure emotional and physical environment for children. They "take care" of the child in terms of many elements: nutrition, a beneficial living schedule, medical care, exposure to appropriate and meaningful learning opportunities, and large doses of love and care. While this nurturance process is continued during the elementary and middle school years, parents also extend their involvement to introducing the child to the many aspects of the culture.

The planning role involves parents in both anticipating and reacting to environmental and developmental changes that occur within the child, themselves, and the family. This process includes parental competency in knowing what to expect at different stages of child development, learning about strategies that can strengthen the family during transition periods, and utilizing problem-solving skills in being a proactive person (Swick, 1984). High risk parents often lack this skill, failing to anticipate and plan for children's development as well as their own. In contrast, Stinnett (1979, 1982) found that effective parents were continual planners. Some of the ways they accomplished this was to utilize regular family meetings, during evening meals, and through their many natural day to day contacts.

Given the increased complexity of life (particularly within family dynamics), the role of *linking the family to school and community* is a parental priority (Schaefer, 1991). Of special significance is the parenting role of helping children gain from the school experience. Swick (1991, p. 45) describes four roles in this regard:

> The four involvement roles that parents contribute to their children's education are learning, supporting, doing, and decision making. In the learning role, parents participate in various parent education experiences such as group meetings, home visits, use of specified

> materials, and other resources. In supporting roles, parents carry out activities that support the teacher's efforts to achieve the best possible learning program for the children and the families. The doing role engages parents in becoming actively involved with the teacher in implementing some aspect of the educational program, for example tutoring, helping with field trips, class projects, and other events. Efforts that involve parents in participatory decision making with teachers usually have a common purpose of improving the school's educational program.

Critical to the parental role in linking up with the school is the collaboration process. It is at the core of the family-school relationship. It involves parents and teachers in working together on virtually all aspects of the growth process. It is a process by which parents expand the potential of children's environment as well as their own through continuous, planned interactions. This calls for conferencing, supporting, and interacting with teachers on a regular basis. Through this process, parents and children gain needed feedback for growth (Swick, 1991).

In a synthesis of the catalytic role that parents play in shaping healthy family environments, Brooks (1987, p. 41) says that in such cases family members:

> care about each other; reach out to each other, and reach out with the expectation that interaction will be positive. They love and respect each other, but all are individuals and all are free to be open and honest. They value individual differences and consider many options when solving problems and show initiative. Often they are involved in many community activities. Parents respect each other as individuals and present models of leadership to children. Power structure is clear, but parents negotiate problems when they arise. Healthy families are made up of individuals who share differing ideas and opinions in an accepting atmosphere.

Competent Parents Positively Influence Children as Learners

When parents are effective in their various roles, children benefit (and so does the school and the society). A consistent finding of various research studies has been the positive influence of parents on children. Ira Gordon (1977), for example, found that by improving parental language skills and their "teaching" skills, children's performance in the primary grades was positively influenced. These children were better readers and in general did better than their peers whose parents were not involved in the parent education activities. An unexpected outcome of the program was that parental self-concept improved, and that parents spent more time with their children—especially in terms of educationally related activities.

Other studies (Comer & Haynes, 1991; Powell, 1988; Swick, 1992) have established the following as significant dimensions of the impact of competent parents on young children.

- They are usually ready to benefit from formal schooling.
- They are less likely to be placed in special education rooms or to be held back in school.
- They are more likely to exceed performance criteria throughout their school years.
- They tend to be socially competent.

It is now apparent that "parents" *provide high risk children with a buffering effect*, enabling these children to overcome barriers to life that in many cases would otherwise degrade their functioning (Garmezy, 1992; Werner, 1987). On the positive side, White (1988) has noted that children of competent parents tend to become capable in every dimension. Garmezy explicates the influence of parents on "high risk" children as one in which children are *protected from the real harm that risks can do and thus focus their energy on proactive things*. Magid & McKelvey (1987) delineate the negative fallout from poor parenting as it "breaks" the bonding cycle and may leave the young child open to various antisocial personality syndromes. What is emerging from such research is a picture of parents as powerful empowerment forces in the lives of children.

Attributes of Powerful Parents

Empowering parents tend to use particular behaviors and processes that strengthen children's self-esteem and sense of competence. They encourage children to communicate effectively, seek their help when needed, and to solve problems in positive ways. Some behaviors used by competent parents (Swick, 1987; White, 1988):

- They listen to their children with their eyes as well as their ears; they know their children through many positive interactions.

- They offer answers to children's questions in ways that stimulate children to think creatively.

- They take an active interest in their children's many interests and activities. They model an active learning style and encourage children to explore the environment.

- They are avid readers! They enjoy reading and they read regularly to their children and for their own personal growth.

- They introduce children to new aspects of the environment and take the time to discuss with them the many things that go on in the environment.

- They offer praise and encouragement for their children; taking notice of even small accomplishments and using these opportunities to build self-confidence.

- They are warm and nurturing, often hugging and touching their children. They encourage their children to be expressive and support them in relating to the many real fears of life.

Parents are recognizing the complexity of their lives and attempting to find proactive ways to be positive influences in the lives of their children. While they are not perfect and face many challenges, they are eager to grow and engage in positive activities that help their children. In many ways, parents are the real visionaries of tomorrow. As early childhood educators we must never forget that it is parents who ultimately face the real test of helping children become empowered.

Supporting the Parent as Teacher

Providing parents with information, support, and validation are important roles of the early childhood professional. The challenges involved in being a competent parent require that the "teaching role" receive special attention.

Parent education must initially focus on two critical areas: information on the parenting process itself, and information (inclusive of knowledge, skills, and attitudes) on child development (Cataldo, 1987). *Parenting information* should emphasize the processes (nurturing, guiding, modeling, and problem solving) and the context (for example, organizing for effective family relationships) needed for carrying out the teaching role in a competent manner (White, 1988). *Child development information* should foster in parents a better understanding of the needs of children as they grow and develop. It should also focus on strengthening parent-child relationships (Cataldo, 1987).

Support in the form of resources and knowledge on how to use the environment as a teaching tool are essential to parental competence. Involving parents in programs and activities where they learn how to shape their support system is one way of empowering them in their teaching role (Powell, 1989).

Validation of parents as their child's most important teacher can occur in many ways. One way is to expect and then support the involvement of parents in their child's learning. Another mode is to maintain close and supportive relationships with parents. Treating parents with respect and dignity reinforces in them their significant role. White (1988) suggests that by offering parents opportunities to grow in their role as teachers, they become more aware of their significance.

Chapter Ten

PARENTING AS A LEARNING PROCESS

The term parenting implies several meanings: nurturance, guidance, and other caring skills and behaviors. A pervasive element in the meaning of parenting, regardless of the particular skill referenced, is that in some form the adult has control over the environment. Not total control but a mastery of the key aspects of their life, particularly as they relate to personal, parental, and family dynamics (Sigel, 1985). As Gordon (1977) noted, parent education itself is a part of this belief that parents must have skills, supports, and resources essential to carrying out their roles. A related belief is that people can indeed acquire and use control in proactive ways and that they can continually refine this process through learning and development (Powell, 1989). Unfortunately, this idea of control is not well understood. A lack of knowledge regarding this concept has impeded the efforts of parents and professionals. Further, inadequate knowledge about parents and their developmental and ecological challenges has often inhibited many parent educators and teachers.

The Meaning of Control

Traditional notions of the term "control" have implied that some form of dualism (master/slave) exists in the human condition. Extensions of this distorted perspective have influenced parent behaviors in negative ways such as the parent seeking to "win" or gain control over the child's life. Our language unfortunately lends itself to such distortions. Recently, scholars from different disciplines have put forth *a more constructive view of control, one that focuses on a harmonious and reciprocal relationship between people and the environment* (Schaefer, 1991). This more "modern" view contains an empathetic and empowering perspective, where parents and children interact in ways appropriate to nurturing each other's individuality.

This definition of control conveys a unitary and inclusive concept of human relationships. In this paradigm, there are no winners or losers but rather individuals in search of ways to interact with their ecology in sensitive modes (Salk, 1983). It also suggests that there is a responsiveness in the culture to "shared power" and some effort to use resources in support of this process. Langer (1983) provides a starting point for understanding this process by noting that *control implies that there is a situation in which individuals have some choice in selecting from options that influence their behavior.* In every situation people are choosing or selecting options to create potential for controlling or influencing events in some way. It is in the process of choosing that people construct their perception of how to interact with the environment. In making a myriad of choices, people define the parameters by which they can relate to life. In other words, *one choice leads to another choice and this process eventually creates a pattern of control.* This process of building an empathetic relationship with the environment is essential to human learning, growth, and development. Indeed, Ford & Lerner (1992, p. 117) point to this notion as integral to the very survival of meaning in developing persons.

> *Directive thought processes give human behavior its future-oriented properties.* Without beliefs in desirable and possible futures, there can be no coherent organization of the flow of one's behavior and no reference against which to evaluate one's activities and experiences. Without direction, life is like a ship on a stormy sea without someone steering it.

Langer (1983), in studying people in various contexts, identified at least three factors that are imperative to acquiring an empathetic construct of control: *the individual's context, the individual's perception of that context,* and *the individual's socio-educational skills* for exercising control in their context.

Context includes conditions that establish parameters in which an individual must function. For example, at one time many hospitals forbid the father's presence in the delivery room. This was simply a part of the "context" in which fathers had to function; thus their control was minimized with regards to influencing this experience. Children experience a similar situation in child care centers where they have little or no input on the food served at lunch time. Mothers of young children who work in situations where they are not allowed sick leave to care for the child without financial penalty experience this same context limitation. It is clear that a key issue in choice-making is: *What latitude exists for having choices within a given situation?* It is difficult for people to develop an empathetic pattern of decision making when their context is predominantly one of dualisms such as work versus family, marriage versus career, or self versus others (Salk, 1983; Pence, 1988). A major element needed in the mix for bringing about more human control is the creation of contexts that support sensitive and proactive actions.

A second element in this process is **the perception** individuals have of their context. Many forces influence how people "see" the events and processes that happen in their lives. The personality of the individual is certainly a factor as well as the significant people they model or were influenced by (Erikson, 1982). The formation of perceptual patterns take place over time and as a result of many interactions. How one perceives the "self" and their "context" reveals where they center their life control scheme. Control is clearly related to the person's sense of power and/or direction (Schaefer, 1983). While there are limits to what an individual can accomplish in any situation, evidence suggests that when a person sees the self as in control it does empower them (Langer, 1983). A hopeful view of life increases the chances of an individual being successful (Sigel, 1985).

The third factor, which might be called **"education for control,"** is a composite of the individual's experience with controlling various human events. This process is a life-span mix of active involvement in choice-making situations as well as formal training related to using thinking strategies. What is important is that people develop a variety of problem-solving skills and acquire experience in applying and refining these skills in control-oriented contexts. For example, as parents acquire skills in caring for infants, additional knowledge can be productively integrated into an already functioning system. Each caring experience adds to and influences the existing scheme of nurturing behavior that parents use in their child care relationships (Ford & Lerner, 1992).

Control acquires meaning that is context relevant and unique to each person. For example, in the Ghanian culture the mother is defined as the child's primary guide until age eight. Through cultural transmission the mother "knows" her control orientation and is provided the necessary resources for carrying out this role (Hagerup, 1985). In other cultures, such as ours, the "control process" is not clearly defined and thus a diversity of parenting styles have emerged. While one person may see control as a narrowly conceived set of responses to very limited life circumstances, another person may view control as a continuing effort to interact with their ecology in a productive manner. Progressive ideologies emphasize the "choice factor" in control and the "growth potential" that is inherent in the wise use of decision-making skills (Salk, 1983). For example, Schaefer and Hunter (1983) in studying parental child-rearing ideologies, found correlations between rigid control schemes and static development in children. In commenting on the results of interviews with parents regarding their locus of control and their perceptions of their interpersonal relationships, Graves (1986) noted that low internal control parents also perceived their context in less than productive ways.

Parental Control Orientations

The development of parent belief systems is a complex and dynamic process that involves elements similar to the emergence of any human control system (Sigel, 1985). Two factors that have increased attention on parental beliefs are: the complexity of the parenting process, and the significance parenting has for the society. Due to a variety of social forces, parents of all contexts seem to be struggling to gain a sense of control. This challenge that parents are dealing with is surfacing in the form of social problems such as mental health diseases, alcoholism, spouse abuse, and other stress-related syndromes (Boss, 1988).

Parents, like other people, develop their ideology of control as a result of experiences over the life span. Individuals bring to the parenting process a historical range of experiences related to their involvement in controlling a variety of situations (Erikson, 1982). For example, an individual who has had few opportunities to make choices and/or develop "control skills" is unlikely to develop such skills during their parenting, unless of course, they benefit from major educational interventions. Brooks (1987, p. 28) describes a summary of the research on this complex process.

> Recent research reveals parents who come to terms with their own negative childhood experiences do not repeat the unhappy interactions with their child. Mothers and fathers who understand and accept their feelings that their own parents could not give them what they wanted are able to create new kinds of relationships with their sons and daughters. Parents who describe difficult times but deny any emotional reaction like anger, sadness, frustration in response to their parents are those most likely to carry over negative patterns in their day-to-day contact because they have not worked through their feelings about their childhood.

The power of parental beliefs is exemplified in the work of Schaefer (1983, 1991) who documented the relationship between maternal locus of control and various benchmarks of children's social and academic progress. Parents who hold progressive beliefs about life such as having optimistic views of the future and seeing themselves as basically in control of their lives tend to foster more successful behaviors in children than do parents who hold less positive perspectives. For example, Rohner (1986) reports that world-wide, parents who reject their children tend to feel rejected themselves and exhibit few control skills. How do parents develop their belief system; especially in relationship to their parenting? Langer's (1983) construct of context, perception, and skills for controlling the environment is applicable to parents.

Parents develop a control orientation within a personal-social context. While this "context" must be seen in a life-span perspective, at this point the discussion is limited to the *parenting context*. The parent's context has two components: one's personal system, and one's ecology. Parental control is related to personal dimensions such as health, level of education, self-concept, and other personal attributes. The personal dimension evolves in relationship to and in interaction with the ecology. The ecology of the parent includes items such as the available choices one might have regarding education, income, and other life-strengthening conditions; available support services one can use to strengthen their position as a parent; and the quality of human relationships a person can experience (Ford & Lerner, 1992).

Deficits in parental context have played a major role in limiting the effectiveness of many parents. Poor health, lack of education, and limited resources have been related to inadequate parenting (Garbarino, 1982; Pence, 1988; Powell, 1988). Situations in which parental choice is limited, such as inflexible workplaces, poor quality child care, lack of informal support resources, and inadequate human services certainly contribute to inadequate parenting (Swick, 1984, 1991). Further, the presence of multiple problems within the parental context can create high-risk situations. While context factors do not cause poor parenting, their presence is cause for concern.

Context provides a framework that contains potential which then must be actualized by parents. The "control potential" may be limited or it may be a rich source of possibilities. For example, while the birthing context is similar in most hospitals, the diversity of individual and family contexts that people bring with them to this experience are endless. The mother's attitudes, the sense of "participation" of significant others, as well as the attitude of the attending professionals are some of the forces that influence parental control during the birthing process. Throughout the life of the child, parents are influenced by many *context forces* such as the neighborhood in which they live, their work place, the schools their children attend, and a variety of other system influences such as television and public policy initiatives (Haskins & Adams, 1983).

Ultimately, *it is what parents do with their context that shapes the direction of the family's destiny.* **Parental perceptions of their ecology establish the range of behaviors** they use in interaction with their children, spouses, friends, and the environment (Ford & Lerner, 1992). The most important question parents can and should ask is: How do I see the world in which I function? Swick and Taylor (1982) delineate ecological question areas that are reflective of where parents are at in terms of their control-potential: 1) the parent's self-image, 2) parental perceptions of their children, 3) how parents feel about their workplace, 4) the confidence level parents have in their children's day care or school, and 5) how parents see their interpersonal relationships. How parents "see" these areas of life is influenced by factors such as their success or failure in different contexts. Schaefer (1985), for example, found connections existed between parent control ideology and their perceptions of the child's potential for success in life. Dix and Grusec (1985) place special emphasis on parental skills for making accurate attributions about sources of behavior and events in their ecology. In other words, *the learning parent not only stands to increase their knowledge of parenting but just as important they are likely to increase their perceptual orientations toward various elements in the ecology* (Sigel, 1985).

Langer's (1983) point that when people "see" the possibility of choices in their environment, their participation in controlling it increases—is pertinent to parental development of decision-making skills. If parents sense little opportunity to improve their position in the community and even less chance to impact specific contexts such as the child care program or the neighborhood setting, their perception of the family's future is limited. In order for parents to develop an empathetic relationship with their environment they must perceive it as a source of potential for life improvement (Sigel, 1985). Further, they must have access to educational experiences relevant to strengthening their position in managing the environment.

Seeing life as a positive experience in all of its dimensions is a skill, a pattern of behavior that is the result of mindful development (Langer, 1989). **Parents' status as related to educational skills** for interacting with life in empathetic ways is linked to their actual performance as parents (Schaefer, 1983). These educational skills begin with what might be called the basics of human relationships which are often learned through social networks. Informal learning situations can influence parental "readiness" to deal with various parenting tasks. Parents tend to model the predominant behaviors they see in the environment. When mindful living is embedded in the context of peoples' lives they are likely to adopt this mode of functioning (Langer, 1983, 1989). *Mindless decision making ultimately leads to a situation where parents are unable to see any connection between their actions and the way life is organized.* Using a process of meta-parenting (parental analysis of parental actions) parents can develop a control ideology where choices and outcomes have some relationship to their lives. By thinking about who one is as a parent (and a person), what one does, and where and how one could refine their parenting skills, the framework for creating a powerful but informal educational schema is in place (Swick, 1987). The following are eight strategies suggested by Brooks (1987, p. 33) as one approach to carrying out a meta-parenting process:

- Acquire information from books and other sources about parenting on a regular basis.
- Connect up with your significant others (or develop your network) for support on a daily basis.
- Become part of a small "social group" that has a great deal in common with your interests.
- Have a "goal," personal and parental, for each week that you work on enjoyably.
- Spend quiet time each day learning more about your self and renewing the positive aspects of your personality.
- Work at creating some basic financial security, no matter how small, that helps increase your faith in tomorrow.
- Nurture a spiritual meaning in your life each day.
- Do something each week that gives you that feeling of being a growing adult.

Formal parent education efforts, when linked to the parent's informal learning system, can extend the control orientation of parents to events and situations such as making choices about health care, family problems, job skills, and other issues (Swick, 1985). Parental knowledge about self as parent and person, child development, community resources, work/job skills, interpersonal skills, and other life skills increase the power of the parents beliefs and actions (Schaefer, 1983). Awareness of one's surroundings and the ability to interact with the environment create a positive context by which parents can develop an empathetic ideology of control.

The isolation of parents from mindful contexts is certain to degrade their parenting efforts. Only an already highly skilled and educated parent will have the tools for responding to mindlessness and even their power to respond is reduced by the limited situations they confront. The richer and the more positive the setting, the better chance parents have to not only acquire productive skills but also to construct a "mind set" that they can use to extend the family's grasp of the world and to strengthen their personal and parental position (Sigel, 1985; Swick, 1987).

Examples of where parent control constructs are distorted (often typified by a fateful view of life) usually include portraits of situations in which a history of aggression or passivity were predominant. Cultural ideologies and parent ideologies transact to create some form of decision making that serves to enable family and community to function. Indeed, the family's ability to "see" the need for personal and intimate relationships may be the only force that serves to help social systems have a conscience (Edelman, 1992; Howard, 1978). However, cultural systems that allow little room for empathetic relationships to develop actually act as impediments to control building in parents. Choices such as "eating or moving out" or "poor day care or no day care" are poor and weak decision-making contexts.

Parental belief systems establish the framework for how children develop and learn as well as the context in which parents individuate themselves (Blazer, 1989; Bradshaw, 1988; Sigel, 1985). These belief systems are the result of the contexts in which parents acquire their construct of life, their perceptions of these situations, and the skills they use to create a relationship with the environment in which they live. Conceptualizations of parenting and family functioning must be broadened to include all of the "influences" that shape parental ideologies related to decision making.

The Learning Parent: A Life-Span Process

The major impediment to effective parenting is the isolated context in which it is perceived by the culture itself. In any culturally valued endeavor, people play at various roles related to the desired outcome over an extended period of time. *They "construct" their image of the desired outcome and acquire and refine the needed skills to achieve it* in a cumulative, sequential, synchronic manner (Hart, 1983). Consider, for example, the master teacher who has spent years in training and practice to acquire and refine her teaching role. Yet as a cultural system, few experiences are provided for people to develop a productive and realistic image of parenting. While there are segments of the society that have integrated the caring process into the family's life system, our human system as a whole is suffering from a shortage of emotional sustenance (Caldwell, 1989).

While great emphasis is often placed on knowledge of specific parenting skills, it is the parental ideology one has formed over the life span that is most critical. In becoming a parent the individual uses his or her existing belief system to bring about order within the various new situations confronted (Jaffe & Viertel, 1980). This belief system has evolved (mindfully or mindlessly) over time and in a particular psychological context that serves as a way of "seeing life"; including the perception of new roles such as parenting. In this sense, people must have many diverse caring experiences that direct and guide their schema of parenting toward a responsible and responsive perception (Swick, 1987). The power of "experiences" within the family as they shape later adult (in particular—parenting) behaviors is presented in the work of Eisenberg (1992, p. 109):

> Much socialization of prosocial behavior seems to occur in the family context. Parents of prosocial children tend to use inductive discipline, provide opportunities for their children to engage in prosocial actions, model and value prosocial behaviors, and encourage perspective taking, empathy, and sympathy. This is particularly true for children who have warm, secure relationships with their caretakers.

Erikson's (1982) schema of life-stages provide a viable framework for understanding the long-term development of control building in human beings. He describes a human construct where people can build an empathetic relationship with life. Through the acquisition of trust, autonomy, identity, and integrity, the individual is able to resolve the self-other dualities inherent in the developmental cycle. Breakdowns in any or all of the processes of social and personal development lead to "proclivities" in the "self" that make empathetic relationships difficult if not impossible. While no person reaches their full potential, the favorable resolution of self-other dynamics does promote the development of belief systems that favor a positive approach to parenting (Galinsky, 1987). The reverse appears to also hold true; that is, individuals who experienced severe rejection as a child tend toward pathological behavior syndromes as adults—particularly when their experiences were of an intensive and pervasive nature. While educational and social-emotional intervention may lessen the impact of such rejection, Rohner (1986) notes that some emotional scar tissue remains with most adults from abusive, neglectful backgrounds.

At the heart of the life span perspective on control building are two essential elements: the formation of a **positive and enduring view of self** as a worthy, productive, and capable person; and the construction of **some form of synchrony with life.** The achievement of self-identity and self-environment stability is critical to forming an empathetic control orientation. While the productive self is often jolted by life changes, it is the control scheme one has developed that can then be used to transform such stressors into growth-oriented experiences (Brooks, 1987).

Indicators of a positive self are seen in the literature on healthy development: a sense of acceptance, an ability to see the world in both realistic and idealistic dimensions, a feeling of significance, an understanding of one's evolving personhood, and a general sense of well-being about self and others (Langer, 1983; Purkey, 1979; Schaefer, 1991).

Indicators of the person having developed some synchrony with life are portrayed in various reports: the ability to act on the environment; a pattern of actions that indicate some skill in dealing with change; an understanding of self-other relationships and the ability to plan for generally positive relations; a sense of what is happening in the environment; an ability to acquire skills for responding to these happenings; and the development of a progressive ideology regarding self and life dynamics (Langer, 1983; Schaefer, 1983; Stinnett, 1981).

Parents who have a positive sense of self and have developed an empathetic relationship with life have done so within a historical framework. They have a history that includes conditions supportive of their development. They have had substantive experiences that have had an enduring and positive influence on their ideology and behavior. They see parenting as a natural extension of their growth. While they are like other parents, subject to various stressors, they have organized a mindful approach to dealing with change and are growing as a result of these experiences (Erikson, 1982; Sigel, 1985).

Social contexts in which caring, nurturing, and problem solving are natural processes carried out by everyone involved have a positive influence on the nature of parenting. It is through such contexts that meaningful growth as a parent can occur and it is the function of parent support programs to facilitate this process.

Parenting: Additional Life-Span Insights

The parent as learner construct is based on some key conceptual points related to the development of parents: the nature of individual learning, the processes of adult development, the ecological system in which parental development occurs, and the dynamics that take place as parents attempt to synthesize various happenings into a viable pattern for personal and parental functioning (Swick, 1987). In effect, to enhance their development parents need to acquire self-insight with regard to their past, their present, and the emerging future. Only as parents gain such insight into their identity can they place the parenting process within a life-span journey.

Who Was I? Examining one's past often occurs naturally when engaged in a role as intimate as parenting. Even when parents deny their own history, they still reference it through their many interactions. Tragically, too many individuals try to parent without reviewing significant influences on their lives.

Insight into one's past (Who was I?) is invaluable to any serious refinement of the present. Continued growth as a parent requires an understanding of the past. In particular, Bettelheim (1987) suggests that parents review their experiences through memories and contacts related to infancy/toddlerhood, childhood, and adolescence.

Finding out about our own *infant years* can be achieved through family stories, memories of relatives, as well as "images" of significance that remain with us. *Interestingly our own attitudes and behaviors as adults will reveal much to us about our early years.* In some cases these are delightful memories. Yet in other cases the very thought of childhood raises a defensive and painful picture. Fraiberg (1987) observed that mothers who were unable to bond with their babies consistently had "histories" of inadequate nurturing with their own mothers. In using an especially designed therapy, Fraiberg was able to help mothers unlock this process and regain their sense of nurturance.

Childhood memories are more "marked" in our minds, particularly at the surface level. Most healthy parents have and point to pleasant childhoods. The warmth, support, and guidance they received are easily recalled (Bettelheim, 1987). Unfortunately, some parents recall punitive and even abusive childhood experiences. While each memory is unique, some of the patterns appear to haunt parents yet today: "He was a hard man and you did it father's way or else," "She never let me know she loved me, but then she had little love in her life," "We never talked with each other, it was a very cold place," and "He hit me often, until I left at 18."

Erikson's (1982) "benchmarks of identity" provide a framework for studying our memories. Attention should focus on the presence or absence of these benchmarks: self-confidence, industry, autonomy, identity happenings, mutuality experiences, and a sense of psychological and spiritual meaning (Brooks, 1987). Five question-areas that help to promote this self-insight process are (Swick & Duff, 1978):

- Do I have childhood images of experiences that nurtured my self-confidence? Or, is self-confidence an area that I need to address?

- Are my developmental experiences reflective of a growth-oriented ideology; where I was encouraged to become autonomous in appropriate ways? Or, did I experience too many extremes developmentally, too much protection or too much freedom?

- As a child and adolescent were my social and emotional interactions predominantly reciprocal, mutual, and nurturing? Or, did I experience the extremes of passivity, external dominance, aggression, or other distortions?

- In my process of becoming were there "benchmarks of identity" that favored proactive and healthy development? Or, is my identity filled with scar tissue from abuse, neglect, isolation, or other damaging influences?

- Has my development helped me to define the rudiments of a belief system that promotes a sense of life's meaning? Or, do I suffer from a lack of moral guidance or distorted guidance?

It is in childhood and adolescence that future parents struggle with questions of identity such as: Who am I? What can I do? What is my place in the world? What is my future? Behavior patterns formed during these periods of development provide "cues" to how these questions will be answered. For example, Pittman (1987) notes the presence of a consistency in the way people deal with "life-transitions" over their life-span. Individuals who experience major difficulties in forming relationships in childhood tend to have similar frustrations at other points in their lives. Indeed, **social competence as acquired from significant and caring adults has been recognized as a major "protective factor" in the lives of at risk children and adults** (Werner, 1987; Garmezy, 1992).

An especially sensitive and yet readily accessible part of our lives is *young adulthood.* In many cases this period of development is when marriage and family life are launched. It is an especially difficult period in our culture *because few "bridges toward identity formation" exist* to support the young person's reach for full adult status. Prior success in life will or should buffer the individual's encounters with young adulthood. This is an explorative period (18-30 years of age) and is usually marked by various attempts to establish a foundation for adult identity, including initial efforts to actualize intimacy in a mutual and serious manner (Erikson, 1982). The resolution of intimacy, industry, and identity issues at this point in life is crucial to the "integrity formation" that is essential to quality parenting. Parents who are still focusing on narcissistic issues of self will confront many "blocks" to carrying out the transformation integral to being a parent (Galinsky, 1987). *The "Who Was I" issues* briefly discussed here must be articulated, examined, and then integrated in favor of a proactive, healthy future if the parenting process is to receive the attention needed. One of the roles of the early childhood educator is to support parents in this process.

Who Am I? The most observed disparity in troubled parents is a distorted and/or troubled self-identity. Usually this distortion is symbolized in surface behaviors that *mask a larger, more encompassing set of dynamics*. Marital conflicts, parent-child confrontations, and related syndromes, when taken to the extreme in a chronic manner, connote both individual and social stress (Bradshaw, 1988). Persistent conflicts that inhibit individual, marital, and family growth are often nested in the insecure self or confused self (Schwartzman, 1985). The existentiality of the "I" is open to many influences including one's past as well as the "now context" and the emerging self (Maslow, 1959). *Given the multiple roles and the complexity of the parenting process, the nurturing and continuous renewal of the "I" is vital to healthy parenting and positive family functioning* (LaRossa, 1986).

Three aspects of the "Who Am I" process that parents must ultimately explore are: the "I" as a unique and valued learner, the "I" as a growing adult, and the "I" as a part of an ever-changing ecology (Swick, 1987).

Parental perceptions of self as a unique learner who is vital to the world is a construct that places the parent in a proactive context. In this way parents can entertain both subjective and objective reviews of "self" and respect their findings because *growth as a unique person* is accepted as essential to any further happenings. Human strengths and frailties are put into a perspective that encourages exploration, unique approaches to life, and continued refinement in one's life orientation (Bettelheim, 1987). Research suggests that this construct of the unique and valued self is correlated with the emergence of similar attributes in other family members (Eklund, 1985).

The deteriorating self (or indeed the pathological self) is open to many negative influences that the healthy self integrates, refines, or redirects as a part of the growth process. Unable to decenter, the deteriorating self is absorbed in the negative elements of "I" and thus encased in a cycle of destructive behaviors (Fraiberg, 1987). The ability to see the many elements in the "I" as dynamic parts of a unique and positive person is inherent in being a growing parent. Bettelheim's (1987) admonition to avoid expecting perfection in the self but to seek it in a playful manner is sound advice.

The "I" as a growing adult is a construct that facilitates parental understanding of personal change and parental planning and action for having a meaningful presence in the world (Fowler, 1989). One of the remarkable and yet alarming experiences of adulthood is the realization that one is constantly changing (and not always for the better) and that one is finite. How one perceives this status/process influences the dynamics of what happens in this context. Most people vacillate among the many variables of "adult"; growing persons actively seek the positive features of this part of life while deficit-oriented individuals may spend their lives avoiding the meaning of growth (Erikson, 1982; Fowler, 1989).

The ability to see the "self" as "adult" connotes a powerful message: that the person can "decenter," "intentionally distance self from the context of self", and "extend and refine the reach and substance of intimacy through mutuality." Intentional growth requires decentering—the ability to place self-growth in a broader context that often requires drastic alterations of the self. Now the "self" is seen as parent, friend, spouse, and helper; the vision of life is now broader, more consonant with "family" and "significant others." This extension of self involves a revamping of one's perceptions of vocation, tasks are no longer limited to the self-centered "I" but are viewed from the family and community "I" (Fowler, 1989). It is through this process of becoming adult that parents define their meaningful presence in the world. Erikson's (1982) concept of generativity is most relevant to this idea of being adult, having meaningful presence. No task is too small or no barrier too difficult when "presence" is seen as generative of conditions that nurture the larger "I," the family.

Part of our presence, however, is drawn from our context and how we see this context. *The "parent as part of an ecology"* is a construct that potentially allows for new growth and renewal (Bettelheim, 1987). Through insight into one's ecology, many influential elements can be studied and refined or re-directed. Content for analysis might include: workplace roles and conditions, friendship dynamics, marital life style, educational involvements, spiritual endeavors, and a myriad of other issues. To grasp a full picture of Who "I" Am, parents must have a grasp of self-ecology dynamics (Bettelheim, 1987; Galinsky, 1987).

Who Am I Becoming? Considering the changes parents experience over the family's life-span, the question of "Who Am I Becoming?" is probably the most important and yet most neglected issue in parent education and in parenting. Many static designs for dealing with parent-family changes have evolved from poor or inadequate understanding of adult growth. Consider, for example, the negative implications of "mid-life crises" or the "empty nest syndrome." While these stage-descriptors are helpful in locating life-points of change, they are detrimental in their focus on decay, isolation, and decline (Jaffe & Viertel, 1980). Gerontology research as well as studies on the psychology of perception have unraveled the "growth dimension" of life and thus opened many new ways of seeing and relating to and with change (Langer, 1983). Three elements that parents and early childhood educators need to attend to within this construct are: articulation of a progressive ideology of life; activation of the vision development process; and formation of plans to bridge one's meaningful presence with one's vision of the future. Consciously or unconsciously this process is carried out in some fashion by all parents. A look at each of the three elements should expand our understanding of this yet rarely examined aspect of parenting and parent education.

Parents initiate their ideology of parenting early on in the family's formation. Naturally, they integrate their prior experiences with this actualization process. The simple yet powerful process of naming a child is a validation of the child and the self as parent. Any action, plan, or scenario that engages parents in better articulating their beliefs about self, marriage, family, and community is a step toward building the framework for the family's future. The interaction of "presence" and "vision" are clearly seen in the parenting process when the partners are in the process of "becoming adult." The ideology building process is not without setbacks, alterations, and even ruptures. Yet the formation of "core beliefs" such as: "I am important," "My child is special," "Life is basically good," "The future can be very positive and meaningful"; have been correlated with proactive, warm, nurturing, and growth-oriented parent-family processes and outcomes (Rohner, 1985; Sigel, 1985; Swick, 1987). In contrast, the absence of progressive beliefs is at best a precursor to static living patterns that lack the substance of a family framework or relating to life's many challenges (Schafer, 1985).

As parents experience the intimacy and trust building with each other and their children, a bonding process occurs. This human bonding, if grounded in progressive beliefs and actions, can lead toward the deployment of the *vision development process.* This process might be viewed as the *fantasy or dreaming part of parenting.* It occurs in all parents but not always in a progressive or nurturing manner (Sigel, 1985). Any vision of self is reflective of one's ecology, past and present. It is also symbolic of the individual's projected self and in the case of parents of a projection of their children's future. For example, Schaefer (1983, 1991) found that parents who were optimistic about the future were more progressive in their child care orientation. In contrast, Swick and Graves (1986) found cynical parents to be more defensive, rigid, and punitive in their child care strategies.

Three attributes of progressive visioning in parents are: a view of self as growing in what can be called "human competence," a view of the child as achieving more autonomy and mutuality, and a view of the world as potentially improvable. The power of parent visioning is evident in the work that indicates perceptions influence our presence and provide us with a *faithful map* for tomorrow (Erikson, 1982; Fowler, 1989; Langer, 1983; Sigel, 1985).

The future "I" that parents project is the "bridge" to their future and the family's future (Bettelheim, 1987). While no one ever achieves their dreams totally, it is the visioning process that helps us give shape to the many options we can pursue to build a better world. A significant part of the generativity dynamics presented by Erikson (1982) and the faith development process depicted by Fowler (1989) centers on the complexities, challenges, and rewards involved in the building of bridges toward the future. The achievement of a sense of the universality of "I" and its presence in our actions, plans, and dreams is a hallmark of mature parenthood (Swick, 1987). The "Who Am I Becoming?" part of this maturing, growing, learning process is the philosophical and artistic, spiritual fabric of life. *Three inner processes (sometimes called life-stages) of this visioning process that seem to be consistent in parental development are:* identity solidarity, generativity wholeness, and integrity reconciliation (Erikson, 1982; Fowler, 1989; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Solidifying one's identity as a parent begins with the recognition of one's new roles or roles transformed (nurturing, guiding, problem solving, modeling) as they occur in parenthood and culminate in the integration of these roles within an ecological system that seeks to promote self, spouse, children, and the community toward progressive ends (Sigel, 1985; Swick, 1987). In effect, one's identity is broadened to encompass the mutuality of significant others and the power of this process in strengthening the total human community. Not all parents achieve this level of identity, but no parent escapes the shadows of its presence. Dysfunctional parenthood is most often described as a process where identity is eroded, sapping the individual's power of vision and creating distorted patterns of behavior (Cohen, Cohler, & Weismann, 1984). The most notable attributes of parents achieving "identity solidarity" are their learning orientation, spiritual authenticity, nurturing personhood, and sense of mutuality (Fowler, 1989; Rohner, 1986; Swick, 1987).

The unleashing of parental energy that is directed toward family and community gains can be called *generative wholeness*. It is more of a psychological and spiritual process than a material outcome. At the core of this phase is a value development, refinement, learning process. It emerges in parents who have solidified their vocation as parenting in the true sense of the term. The commitment of energy to literally hundreds of value building tasks in self and family as well as in the community is a **SIGN** of faith that these invisible bridges can be realized. Caring for a sick child, family prayer, educational ventures, and work-related tasks are some examples of how parents form this wholeness that generates power in themselves and their children (Blazer, 1989).

As in any developmental-ecological process, parenting requires the stress and change that come with the growth process. *The integration of "selves" into an unfolding or emerging person necessitates a reconciliation of these selves into a valued whole.* Parents must constantly grapple with the dualisms of self-family, self-community, and the many combinations of self-other triads in their struggle to reach wholeness. It is an ever-continuing process, one that—in a sense—feeds the parental development process. Without a learning orientation, parents will and do become overwhelmed by this process. Learning and support are essential, particularly in the forms of linkages and services.

The past, present, and future selves are amazingly contiguous. Patterns acquired in early childhood help and/or haunt us for a lifetime. Education in the form of self-insight, therapy, formal learning, counseling, networking, and other modes offer us possibilities for refining, renewing, extending, and redirecting our selves toward more productive ends.

Supporting The Learning Parent

The most powerful influence of parent education may be the least understood part of the process: *increasing the parents' perceptions of self as a significant person in the child's life.* While there is certainly value in educating parents for specific roles and tasks, it is far more critical that parents internalize the psychological tools for self-education. Many early childhood and parent educators have incorrectly assessed their programs as failures when specific outcomes are not achieved. A broader context for such assessments would be to have parents review how program experiences influence their belief system, or indeed nurtured it directly or indirectly (Powell, 1989). A hidden dimension in parent and family support and education programs is the belief system and related actions that parents rely on to carry out their complex roles. In other words, how do parents see themselves as parents? And, what is their belief system regarding their personal and parental roles?

Parents construct their image of parenting over extended periods of time and any refinements of this image take intentional planning and some form of directed experience. While parents may adopt a particular skill or process to appear capable in the eyes of parent educators, they generally rely on their "parenting ideology" in handling real family situations. This ideology is often shared with other parents and particular relatives, and in some cases is shared through discussion with parent educators—those who are keen observers and listeners (Powell, 1988). For example, Gordon (1977), Pence (1988), and Schaefer (1983) have found correlations between parent beliefs and children's functioning, socially and academically. But all three researchers point to a more critical process that goes on in well-designed support programs: the changes in how parents see themselves, beginning to believe in themselves as important and capable persons.

Apparently the ability to see one's self as influential in the child's development sparks the insight that one can be mindful in their approach to many other areas of life (Swick, 1991, 1992). Mindless or chaotic modes of parenting seem to prevail when parents lack the problem-solving skills essential to their role, do not understand the context in which they are functioning, perceive themselves in "choiceless" situations, or when a combination of these elements exist. Clearly, a major role of parent educators is to engage parents in learning arrangements where they can broaden their cognitive, social, and psychological skill kit for dealing with the many dimensions of parenting (Swick, 1987). Non-traditional educational modes, such as parent-directed discussion groups or parent mentoring programs, deserve much more attention as articulated by Powell (1989).

In effect, early childhood educators and parent educators can be of critical support in designing learning environments where parents explore questions like:

*Who am I? *How do I see myself? What are my beliefs?

*What is the nature of my parenting context?

There are many modes for engaging parents in this process: home visits, discussion groups, study teams, parent libraries, workshops, mentoring programs, and other means. What is critical in this process is for parents to come to the realization that they are capable of influencing their surroundings; that is, that they are worthy, productive, growing people. For many parents to be able to come to this insight, their context must be altered so they can perceive themselves as participants in the ecology. We learn about ourselves through the vision of other people: capable/incapable, mindful/mindless, valuable/worthless. When we are not given choices or given only poor choices, our "context" for parenting is diminished greatly. To learn to see the self as valuable, a parent must have a context in which it is possible to make choices that will guide and reinforce their realization of this insight (Galinsky, 1987; Langer, 1983).

There is tremendous potential within the emerging empathetic, ecological parent education paradigm. Consider, for example, the parent who views himself or herself as unable to educate the child because of personal educational limitations. Why does this parent hold this view? Usually because of the way he was treated by significant people in the environment. In some cases, educators actually reinforce such views of impotence in parents. A proactive orientation would be to nurture the parent toward the realization that he or she can influence the child through using resources in themselves, the community, through self-education, and through family literacy habits (Cataldo, 1987). Of particular significance is the focus on parent mentoring, networking, discussion and sharing sessions, and parent-directed programs (Powell, 1989; Swick, 1992).

Ultimately, it is parents who alter their own behavior, thus the critical need for involvement-oriented parent education modes. Energy in program designs needs to be directed toward supportive efforts that help parents acquire skills for reorganizing perceptions of self and others, acquire resources to carry out desired goals, and establish a mindful, sensitive, and compassionate approach to parenting (Swick, 1984).

The process of "parent change" is continuous and needs varied but on-going support. Every parent is unique in that they bring to parenting a history of life-experiences related to caring, nurturing, and problem solving. The ideological position of parents influences the choices parent educators have with regard to "starting" points for program design. In some cases, the emphasis must be on building a foundation for positive parent self-esteem while in others it may be more of a case of nurturing what has been initiated.

With an understanding of the *parent as learner* early childhood professionals can articulate their primary function as related to supporting parents. This function begins with a supportive posture toward all parents, seeking to be mutual partners with them in the learning process. It is extended through the sharing of information, arranging for "active parent discussions," and through the process of helping with specific issues. As professionals, we must view each parent as a *learning, developing adult who desires to develop a viable and meaningful self-social system.*

Chapter Eleven

PARENTAL INTEGRITY AND FAMILY WELL-BEING

The study of parental functioning has received considerable attention from scholars in the social sciences. The work of Bronfenbrennner (1979), Brooks (1987), Cohler (1984), Furstenberg (1985), Galinsky (1987), Gordon (1975), Hamner & Turner (1992), Rohner (1986), Schaefer (1983, 1991), Swick (1987), and White (1988) indicate a new paradigm regarding parent functioning is emerging. As discussed in previous chapters, this paradigm centers around maximizing the human potential of parents as they carry out their roles. Individuals who achieve most of their potential appear to have a high degree of what might be called *human integrity*. The converse is true of people who achieve very little of their potential. A process for delineating the components of parental integrity and shaping human systems to support it is the focus of this chapter. Parent education, public policy, and early childhood program designs need to examine and integrate the implications of this paradigm into their work with parents, children, and families.

Parental Integrity: The Basis For Action

Parent behavior is a mirror of a belief system that reflects a view of self and the environment (See Chapter Ten for a discussion of this concept). The misrepresentation of parent belief systems has influenced the inappropriate use of various parent and family support program strategies (Powell, 1988). Efforts to support the development and learning of parents must be linked to their beliefs which can most distinctly be conceptualized as *parental integrity*. The term integrity includes various meanings that center on one's ability to define a set of quality conditions by which to live and to then carry them out in a lifestyle that is representative of mutuality, harmony, growth, and security (Bradshaw, 1988). Integral to this concept is that parental development of integrity takes place within a broader cultural system, thus diverse modes of shaping an integrity agenda emerge within different cultures. Professionals who work with children and families need to be sensitive to the cultural facet of parenting, and supportive of varying cultural values within the parenting process (Fantini & Cardenas, 1980). For parents, the issue is to articulate conditions for being effective and to then create processes for carrying out these conditions (Stinnett, 1980). The dynamics of parent and culture must be recognized as dynamic forces within this paradigm.

Four factors interact to influence the development of parental integrity: locus of control, developmental status, personal self-image, and interpersonal supports/relationships. These factors are interrelated and comprise the status of an individual's parental integrity (See Figure 1).

Locus of Control	Developmental Status
Interpersonal Supports	Personal Self-Image

Figure 1. Factors Comprising Parental Integrity

For example, *locus of control* is the degree to which a person perceives they control their behavior and the environment in which they function. This does not mean that the parent feels that they have total control or mastery over everything in their life, rather it implies that they feel secure in directing most aspects of their life (Dix & Grusec, 1985). Two terms are integral to the construct of control: *perception and control* (See Chapter Ten for a discussion on parent control). The basic meaning of control is that individuals believe they are able to influence most of the crucial decisions in life. *Perception* as it is used in this presentation refers to how parents see the ecology, their subjective assessment of themselves as functioning in both family and community contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In other words, one might be functioning quite well but not perceive it that way. Perception is what people base their functioning on, it fuels the action plan of every person (Swick, 1987). *Control* as Langer (1983, p. 20) states "is the active belief that one has a choice among responses that are differentially effective in achieving the desired outcome. Such beliefs are based on one's interactions with others and their personal interpretations of these dynamics. In effect, parents have to see that they indeed have integrity-building choices and believe in themselves as capable persons who can use these choices in empowering ways (Schaefer, 1983).

Research supports the notion that **"control" is related to parental efficacy,** which in turn, is a factor in empowering all family members. Parents who perceive that they have few choices and/or little control of their lives are characterized as having a *low locus of control* or as *having a high external control orientation* (meaning they rely on external events as their primary source of decision making) (Schaefer, 1985). In contrast, parents who exert control over their lives are said to have a *high locus of control;* relying on their internal skills and resources in carrying out the decision-making process. With regard to instrumental, affective, behavioral, and attitudinal patterns of parents, control appears to be a central element in the integrity-building process. Parents who see themselves as controlled by external forces usually lack an essential element of parental integrity; they tend to project problems and stressors on to the environment and often reflect a fatalistic perspective about life. In contrast, parents who have a sense of power over their own destiny have the basis for developing the needed mastery of skills connected to the parental integrity process (Swick & Graves, 1986). Rotter's work (1966) on this construct indicates that *internal locus of control is the key to developing competent individuals who can exert continuing mastery of the major elements of life.* Elements that interact to make up one's locus of control include: *parent self-perceptions, parent understanding of their work context, their views related to their children and the family, the neighborhood and school, and their perceptions of involvements in these settings* (Swick & Taylor, 1982).

Locus of control is a dynamic process, responsive to the experiences of each parent. For example, it is known that degrading workplace practices can negatively influence parental functioning; it does reduce their control by the fact that fewer and poorer choices exist (Kamerman & Hayes, 1982). Poor day care and unsafe neighborhoods are debilitating; they impact how parents see themselves and their environment (Pence, 1988). Research on parental belief systems indicates that in spite of low resource environments, many parents maintain a high locus of control orientation, making wise choices within a very limited ecology (Swick, 1992). At the same time, the presence of strong support systems, responsive and positive helpers, and an enriching ecology are clearly strong influences on parental locus of control (Schaefer, 1983; Swick & Graves, 1986).

Another factor influencing parental integrity is the **developmental status of parents.** Scholars in family life education have described the presence of developmental stages which parents experience as they come to understand their unique role in nurturing and educating the child. Family systems models usually include variations of the following themes: initial phase of parental development, formative stage of basic parenting and family habits, style organization stage for problem solving and meeting family and parental needs, maintenance stage for sustaining parent and family functioning, and consolidation stage for preparing self and family for transition to more autonomous functioning (Schwartzman, 1985). One particular developmental framework of value is Galinsky's (1987) scheme of interacting parenting stages. Her initial emphasis is on the *image making and nurturing stages*, where parents construct their vision of who they are to be as parents and how they begin to translate this vision into nurturing behaviors with the child. Of particular significance in Galinsky's scheme is the focus she places on the dynamics of parental development as related to their environment, past experiences, and their marital and friendship relationships.

Regardless of the model, the common theme is that the parent gains an increasing level of *maturity and mastery* with growth as a parent; the implication being that the parent makes gains in their integrity status. As parents gain in caring skills, for example, it is logical to assume that they also gain a new sense of confidence and are more comfortable in approaching new parenting situations (Swick, 1987). Another common theme prevalent in different models is that parents' early parenting experiences are critical to the integrity-building process. In effect, the way they initiate their parenting orientation heavily influences consequent actions as a parent (Galinsky, 1987). Developmentally, parents need strong supports early on in their parental journey.

It is important to note that progression through family and parenting stages is not inherent in being a parent or a family member. Rather, the progression process is a description of how many parents and families experience the life cycle in a meaningful way. Some parents may struggle with early parenting demands, become impotent in the face of this stress and never experience the full developmental process. In other cases, parents may suffer from intergenerational abuse syndromes and be stymied in their efforts to create nurturing images of themselves as parents. All parents need empowering experiences that support their initial and continuing efforts to become developmentally engaged in the growth process of parenting (Galinsky, 1987). *Developmental status is a dynamic process by which parents can learn from their experience and refine their parenting focus.* It is clearly influential in bolstering or limiting their integrity as family and community leaders (Calhoun, 1980).

Personal self-image is a composite individuals construct of themselves as a result of many life experiences (Gordon, 1976; Ford & Lerner, 1992). Parental self-image is linked to personal constructs and has been correlated with parental functioning (LaRossa, 1986). Integral to self-image are several human perceptions: views of self and others, personal happiness, future views of local and global events, and one's sense of efficacy. Low self-image detracts from a parent's potential to carry out roles such as nurturing and guiding. Having a positive sense of self enables parents to extend themselves in interactions with children that produce quality situations for everyone (Swick, 1987).

Parental integrity emerges within an ecological system that contains the potential for helping parents to actualize their skills in positive ways. **Interpersonal supports** influence the development of self-image, promote or impede development, and strengthen or weaken parental locus of control. For example, Pence (1988) found that the quality of day care available to parents influenced their perceptions of what possibilities existed for the family. Other research clearly indicates that workplace factors, informal social network relationships, available social resources, and intra-family supports do influence parental integrity (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Hetherington, 1979; Garbarino, 1982; Swick, 1987).

While all of the dynamics of the relationships between the forces that influence parental integrity are yet to be determined, there are some valuable insights that can be applied to supporting parents and families.

One insight is that *effective parents have developed (and continue to refine) a variety of social contacts for use in strengthening their position as parents* (Stinnett, 1979; Pence, 1988). This skill of "networking" is acquired through many experiences over an extended period of time. Both formal education and informal learning experiences appear to nurture this skill. Activities like caring for others, engaging in community activities, relating effectively to peers, and contributing to the neighborhood seem to open up new avenues for parents (Cochran & Henderson, 1990). These social contacts and family networks provide parents with several resources: information, opportunities for sharing, contacts for problem solving, and other resources (Brown & Swick, 1979).

Another insight observed regarding quality parenting focuses on the characteristic of *critical thinking*. Parents use higher level thinking skills in many decision areas: when to have a child, how to manage family dynamics, and in regard to many other family and personal dimensions. Schaefer (1985), for example, found important connections between parental educational orientation and their perceptions of their control over family and personal issues. Perhaps problem solving and nurturing have become the priority roles of parents, both of which require continued growth and learning on their part. Integrity requires sustained growth within an ever-evolving ecology.

Apparently, the various combinations of education, meaningful life experiences, and access to social supports create conditions that foster high parental self-image, which in turn increases parental self-confidence in dealing with the many issues and challenges they face in family living. Brooks (1987, p. 48) summarizes the tremendous growth challenges parents face as they negotiate the family's journey:

> When parents are engaged in the process of rearing children, they themselves grow and mature. They, like children, go through states of growth as parents. Anticipating the birth, they create images of themselves as parents and of the children to come. When babies arrive, they become attached to them, learn caregiving skills, and arrange their lives to balance their own and their children's needs. Parents become effective authority figures who can set and enforce limits as children become more mobile and explore the world. As children become aware of the world outside the home, parents become its interpreters. As children mature, parents share authority with them, giving them practice in making decisions. Finally, parents help their children leave the nest.

Factors That Impede Parental Integrity

Parental integrity is not a static variable but rather a dynamic process dependent upon the emergence of many parenting skills. In addition, a social system that supports parental development is needed for the full activation of this process. Major discrepancies in either system can impede the family's development (See Figure 2).

Effective parenting requires the use of many control skills. These skills can be organized into categories such as attitudinal orientation, management strategies, human relationship perspectives and behaviors, personal development, and family functioning (LaRossa, 1986). These skills are used by parents in carrying out a variety of tasks such as planning schedules, communicating with spouse/friend and children, interacting at work, selecting child care, and managing finances. When the parental control system becomes ineffective, various parent and family problems often emerge to stress the system beyond its limits (Anderson & Carter, 1984).

For example, continued negative interactions of parents with their ecology may influence a fateful view of the world around them. Negative attitudes toward people and the environment reduce the parent's influence over their encounters with life (Langer, 1983). One situation that highlights this point of view is that of the "new parent" who, lacking in knowledge and/or self-confidence in dealing with infants, experiences increasing levels of frustration in failing to meet the baby's needs (or at least in their view of the baby's needs). A continuum of failure and stress may lead to less than optimum parent-infant interactions and set the stage for later crises (White & Kaban, 1979). Knowledge and interpersonal supports can buffer the new parent from such stress, enabling them to establish a positive foundation upon which to develop proactive interactions with the child (Meyerhoff & White, 1986).

Deficient Control System	Developmental Deficiencies
Inadequate Support System	Negative Self-Image

Figure 2. Factors Impeding Parental Integrity

As Langer (1983) points out, *control building* is a continuous process by which individuals attempt to achieve increasing mastery over the environment. Impediments to parent mastery of the family ecology such as a lack of knowledge in child development or a severe shortage of basic resources directly impact their attitude orientation and eventually encase them and the children in an ecology of despair. The findings on the long-term negative influence of poor prenatal care on children's total development is one example of this process (Boyer, 1991).

Negative parental perceptual orientations eventually infect parent modes of functioning, both in the personal and family contexts (Swick, 1989). Parents who have a positive attitude tend to manage their lives effectively and extend this lifestyle to their children through modeling and through nurturing interactions with them. In productive family environments, parents plan schedules, organize family time, anticipate various needs, and organize a system for renewing and strengthening their personal development (Stinnett, 1981). These functional parent behaviors are rooted in a "system" that contains multiple control skills and supports, without which parents would face severe stress (Galinsky, 1987).

One dimension of this control process is the parent-child interaction system. White (1988) found that first-time parents who managed the home as a learning environment for the infant and toddler were more positive and facilitative in every respect. Schaefer & Edgerton (1983) found that parental control over the family ecology included their selection and construction of learning situations for the child. Recently, Swick (1987) found that low-control parents tended to see themselves as very inadequate in terms of designing environments that were learning oriented for the child. While no parent is perfect in managing the home as a learning ecology, major flaws in this process create a less effective situation for the child. Studies of children and parents who are functioning in pathological ways note the correlation between pathology and chaos (Starr, 1979; Kagan & Schlosberg, 1989). These studies also note that "parental management" that is effective is non-punitive, supportive, and nurturing.

Parent views of their social network are related to all aspects of their personal and parental functioning (Cohen & Weissman, 1984; Pence, 1988). *Interpersonal supports* are products of both the society and the individuals who act to capitalize on using and, where needed, creating services and supports that enhance the quality of life. The many stressors inherent in parenting require that parents have a social arrangement that validates their role and supports their involvement in services such as quality child care, health care, and educational and economic activities that strengthen the total family. Parents who have developed positive interpersonal networks appear to function at a higher level of effectiveness. Their involvement with significant others, with particular support groups, with informal resources, and with their families appears to buffer them from the isolation that can quickly erode family stability (Cochran & Henderson, 1985).

Inadequate support systems impede parental functioning in many ways: reducing options for use in nurturing children, delimiting the parent's personal development, influencing parental self-image negatively, and creating high potential for family problems (Brofenbrenner, 1979; Pence, 1988). Two major social support system problems have been consistently documented: a shortage of resources that parents need to meet basic family needs, and a lack of parental knowledge on how to organize and use available resources to meet family needs (Swick, 1984). These two forces tend to interact. For example, a parent may know what health care is needed but lack the resources to acquire the needed treatment. In such situations, many preventable problems may evolve to become serious family stressors. The other scenario is where resources are available but the parent lacks the needed knowledge and skills to access and use them effectively. While parent education is certainly influential, in some cases more serious and long-term family preservation strategies may be needed (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

Intentional developmental experiences that serve to promote both personal and parental functioning are connected to the individual's life-control effectiveness (Langer, 1983). A key symptom of parental ineffectiveness is their isolation from the environment. Personal growth through reading, meaningful work, recreational outlets, and other social and intellectual endeavors expands the parent's self-social awareness, stimulates new ideas for parenting, provides new strategies for increasing parent control over the environment, and may serve to meet individual emotional needs (Galinsky, 1990). Jaffe & Viertel (1980) report that first-time parents of infants often become so engrossed in parenting and thus too isolated from themselves that their efficacy in all roles is impeded. Brooks (1987) describes one parent's approach to using personal development as a means of nurturing her parenting.

> Radl began a program to improve her behavior with her children, rewarding herself when she met her goals. She discovered that to be the kind of giving mother she wanted to be, she had to look after her own needs as well. She had to get plenty of rest, eat a healthy diet, and find time for relaxation.

Family functioning ultimately depends on parental integrity as it is articulated in the modes thus far examined. While difficult to assess in quantitative terms, the parental style of carrying out family activities such as dealing with marital concerns and/or the child's needs is the "elan" of the family control system (Swick, 1987). Four parent behaviors reflective of this process are described by Swick (1984): nurturing, problem solving, guiding, and modeling. These critical control behaviors are documented as playing a major role in family and child development. For example, Rohner (1986) notes that warm and nurturing parents have a positive influence on children's development and learning. White & Kaban (1979) documented that parental guidance strengthened the child's prosocial development. Schaefer (1985) found that parents who were proactive problem solvers influenced their children toward similar patterns of behavior. Finally, LaRossa (1986) found parent modeling to be a powerful teaching resource in children's acquisition of social skills.

Control is the parents' main tool for creating both personal and family integrity. This "control" construct is rooted in what Schaefer (1985) calls modernity. In effect, progressive parents use a shared-control process to support the autonomous development of the child and to nurture their own growth within the family ecology. Through many personal and parental experiences, parents acquire and develop their approach to responding to family needs. They depend on the social system in which they function to support them in their efforts to be warm and positive parents as well as growing and learning persons.

Facilitating the Development of Parental Integrity

The development of parental integrity does not take place in a vacuum but within a complex social system. *The failure of society to nurture parenting as a vital process can lead to the demise of parents and the dissolution of meaningful family life* (Hamburg, 1992). As our discussion has highlighted thus far, parents formulate their "control scheme" through the acquisition of knowledge and corresponding life experience. Parents acquire a high degree of control over their lives (and the guidance they provide for children) through experiencing success at various tasks such as educational attainment, social involvement, career development, and family harmony. Clearly, the development of parental integrity is a life-span process and not an entity that can be taught or acquired in a short period of time. It is also clear that integrity is a process and thus open to change depending upon the interface between parents and their ecology (Eklind, 1985; Ford & Lerner, 1992). As cultures become more complex and filled with the stress of constant change, parents need more supports in order to better carry out this process of integrity building and refinement.

The system in which parents function includes the internal dynamics of family life; inclusive of marital relationships, parent-child interactions, and the external dynamics that occur in contacts with neighbors, employers, peers, friends, and relatives as well as the ideological interface parents establish as a result of these experiences. It is within this *parenting system* that each individual develops and continually refines a process for controlling their life. The degree to which parents master this control-building process may be viewed as their *parental integrity status.*

The human ecology influences the development of parental integrity in four distinct ways: fostering the control-building process in parents, offering educational and training opportunities that support an increase in parental control of life, provisions for support services that enhance parental potential to shape family life positively, and opportunities for parents to develop and use social networks and supports that increase their control over family and life events (Cataldo, 1987; Haskins & Adams, 1983; Swick, 1985; Schaefer, 1991; White, 1988) (See Figure 3).

Pediatric Care & Support Options	Quality Day Care Options
Personal & Parental Development Options	Workplace Support Practices

Figure 3. Societal Influences on Parental Control Building

Each person lives in an ecological arrangement that directly and indirectly encourages or discourages their efforts at creating integrity (Langer, 1983). In studying parent and family dynamics, an issue to consider at the outset is how do parents perceive their situation in relationship to establishing some influence over the environment? That is, *do parents function in a situation that reinforces their efforts to achieve control and set direction for family wellness?* Answers to this question are found in almost every interaction parents have within the family and within the society. For example, what latitude are parents given in shaping their involvement with the newborn infant in the hospital pediatric ward? What options do parents have in selecting and using quality child care? Beyond the family environment, what opportunities exist for parents to use in developing their personal talents as well as refining their parenting skills? What flexibility do parents have in the workplace to use in meeting family needs such as taking care of a sick child? All of these factors influence parental perceptions of what is important regarding their involvement in family life development. Environments where choice making is limited do little to foster control-building skills in parents or children. One example of the importance of "context influence" on parental control is highlighted by LaRossa (1986) in relation to birthing arrangements. The point is made that when parents have a choice to act as co-partners in the birthing process they usually take control of the situation with more confidence and are more open to guidance from the surrounding professionals. This same process is at work in parental actions related to day care selection. In other words, the potential for parental control is increased when the ecology supports such direction (Swick, 1985; White, 1988).

Parent Education For Control Building

Three types of educational arrangements provide possibilities for strengthening parent control in relationship to family functioning: education for parenting, personal/developmental education, and career related education and training (See Figure 4). White (1988) reviews *three basic areas of parenting that well-designed educational programs can support:* skills for using the home as a learning environment, knowledge regarding the development and learning of children, and strategies for having effective and nurturing parent-child interactions. Considerable support has emerged over the past decade for promoting "education for parenting." Schorr & Schorr (1988) summarize some of the major influences of this educational effort: increased participation of parents in their children's learning and development; a strengthening of parental self-confidence; increased control over family dynamics; and the development of better social relationships with family support groups.

Education for Parenting	Education for Personal & Social Development
Education for Career Development	Informal Learning Experiences

Figure 4. Education for Parent Control Building

Education about one's personal development and relationships with the environment is also essential to having a strong sense of parental integrity (Jaffe & Viertel, 1980; Galinsky, 1987). The natural stress of being a parent requires supportive learning and enrichment experiences. Indeed, Swick (1985) suggests that parent education should begin with the parent's personal development. Gordon (1975) noted that as parents gained knowledge about themselves and how to improve their lives, they improved their self-image. Personal developmental educational activities can be a part of the broader mission of "parent education." Powell (1989) observed that within a formal parenting program, parents invented their own agenda to include these personal dimensions. These dimensions include: ways to enrich their social life, sharing experiences with another adult, gaining information on ways to improve themselves personally, and a variety of other enrichment topics. As Cohler (1984) reports, parents who have a "private me," have pursuits beyond the home that enrich them personally, and have a true relationship with their spouse or a friend are more likely to have the endurance for parenting than insecure and isolated persons.

One's level of influence on their environment is related to their ability to carry out meaningful work. Parents who lack essential job skills find it difficult to handle the parenting role. Job training, career development, and occupational renewal programs can serve to support the control-building process so essential to quality parenting. Some teen-parent education programs are integrating job training and related adult education experiences with much success (Hamburg, 1992). Gainful employment is no guarantee of quality parenting, but it does provide individuals with some power to use in dealing with family needs. Educational activities that strengthen parental skills in the personal, family, and community sense not only improve parent self-image but influence the total family system (Garbarino, 1982).

The emergence of *parent education/family support* "centers" is one response to this need for a broader and more inclusive form of parent education. Parent-Child Centers and Family Education Centers focus on the three forms of parent education described here and, in addition, attempt to connect the total family to needed resources and supports (Swick, 1991).

Supporting Parent Control-Building Efforts

The integrity of every parent is influenced by the support system or lack of such a system in their continuing involvement (See Figure 5). Not only must the parent's system include plentiful human and material resources, they must know how to use them to support the development of the total family. Parents need a support system that strengthens their foundation for meeting child and family needs. The interactive nature of family relationships is witnessed in the reciprocity of parent-child and parent-parent exchanges. When an imbalance occurs in the needs/resources situation of any family member it impacts everyone in that family. For example, Hetherington (1979) found that single parents who were deficient in terms of receiving psychological validation were not likely to have a very positive influence on the children. Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1986) also notes this reciprocal process in the family and points to the need for "third party" supports that undergird the parental effort to maintain integrity.

Parent Control Building Potential	Internal Family Supports
External Family Supports	Parent Control Building Potential

Figure 5. Supporting Parent Control Building

Support services that serve to increase parents control over the family ecology include neighborhood contacts, the work place, school and community involvement, assistance with basic services (health, education, job training), and related family-strengthening resources. *Internally, the family provides a natural support and renewal source when it is functioning effectively.* Strong marital support, for example, provides essential psychological and instrumental validation and assistance. Additionally, family harmony provides a spiritual resource that enables parents and children to overcome many daily stressors (Swick, 1989). The parenting alliance described by Cohler & Weissman (1984) is the "bonding" foundation of the family, where parents are partners in creating a nurturing learning ecology. Brooks (1987) explains that parents are likely the most influential "support" because they (in the case of a single parent it would be a significant friend) have the daily emotional and instrumental opportunities to strengthen each other and the children. External supports also have a major impact on parent and family functioning

The neighborhood, for example, can serve as a source of support in meeting social, recreational, security, and other learning and development needs of the family (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In the sense of today's family, the neighborhood includes any of their psychological and spiritual sources of energy as well as the traditional proximity benefits inherent in a geographical context. People may construct their neighborhood by capitalizing on many places in the community: immediate geographical setting, a day care center, or a church across town. The key issues involved are: Do parents see their neighborhood as a resourceful and useful environment for the family and are they skilled in using it to the family's benefit (Brown & Swick, 1979)? Perhaps the most critical role that the neighborhood plays in advancing parent control skills is the social validation and enrichment it potentially offers

(Cochran & Henderson, 1985). As noted in previous discussion, the isolated parent is open to many stressors that are typically not present in parents who are connected to strong social supports.

The parent-workplace interface influences parental control potential in at least two ways: the availability and nature of work in the community, and what happens to parents while in the workplace. These two factors have a major impact on how parents see the "work or career" aspect of their lives and in turn strongly influences family dynamics (Kamerman & Hayes, 1982). The workplace and its part in family become even more significant with the realization that in a majority of families both parents work outside of the home. As Brooks (1987) notes, the positive aspects of this situation are that it offers opportunities to broaden the development and learning of everyone in the family. However, it also presents special challenges such as scheduling family life so that parents and children have the needed time to nurture each other and to take care of family and parenting renewal needs (Galinsky, 1987). Further, the workplace context must be reshaped to support this new family structure. Practices like flextime, paid maternity and paternity leave, and industry-sponsored child care are becoming more prominent. *The humanization of workplaces is essential to improving parental functioning in any social arrangement where family roles and community roles are so complex and so intimately interrelated* (Kamerman & Hayes, 1982). Parents have new "needs" when both are engaged in out-of-home work contexts: the need for time to be involved in their children's education, time for responding to family emergencies, and opportunities for personal renewal activities. Lack of work is also influential in the family and parent ecology. It can degrade parental integrity when it becomes chronic and ultimately devastate the family's basic needs system (Hamburg, 1992).

Schools, churches, and other community agencies serve to enhance the family's potential. Schools can play a major role in increasing parent control skills and in expanding the child's social skills in interacting with systems beyond the home. The critical factor here is that parents (and children) see the school or child care center as supportive of their growth and as sensitive to the total family's place in the social system (Garbarino, 1982). Quality child care, for example, has been linked to stronger parent self-image, improved family harmony, and to better work habits and attitudes on the part of parents (Pence, 1988, Galinsky, 1990). Schools and child care programs that involve parents in making decisions regarding the child's education and in the school's program are providing a type of parent education that can lead to an increase in family-school involvement across the human system (Swick, 1984). Critical in creating stronger family-school and family-church ties is a refocusing of the attitudes of helping professionals toward families, recognizing the inherent strength in parents and children and supporting this strength through viable efforts (Swick, 1991).

The parent/family/community linkage is the central factor in supporting the development of parental integrity. An active ideological basis for parent-development and family-development that concretely recognizes and validates parenting and family life as parts of the social fabric is a must. Parents and social institutions that act in isolation from one another reduce each other's control system and deprive children of the best possible system for becoming human. The integrity of society is dependent upon the integrity status of parents. The process of developing parental integrity is developmental and takes place in an ecological system. When this system is in order parents acquire an increasing sense of power by using it to manage their personal and family lives. Major imbalances in the human ecology can only deter parents in their quest to be effective family leaders.

Implications for Designers of Early Childhood Programs

A substantial body of research supports the parental integrity paradigm (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Gordon, 1975; Langer, 1983; Powell, 1989; Schaefer, 1991; Swick, 1991; White, 1988). The paradigm provides a map of parent development that is centered in the control of events by parents. That is, parents develop, over time, a scheme for acting on and responding to all facets of their development. In the personal sense, parents have a historical identity that influences their social relationships, work aspirations, use of leisure time, and many other life functions. This personal view of things and events shapes parental views of children, parenting, and their constructs for controlling life situations. The composite of parental control skills as they are used in handling personal and family dynamics can be identified as *parental integrity*.

Parental integrity is the major factor in creating a positive arrangement for the healthy development of children (Bowlby, 1984). It is now substantiated that parent behaviors, both directly with children and indirectly through their work and social involvement, are the basic means by which children establish their initial views of the world. For example, research from different disciplines shows that what children see parents do is actually more powerful than what children hear from parents about behavior (Brooks, 1987; LaRossa, 1986; Schaefer, 1985). Children observe the ways that parents handle problems, relate to each other, and carry out the various family-building tasks.

Traditionally, early childhood educators have weighted the design of learning environments toward children's needs. While this is commendable, recent research would direct early childhood professionals to balance their decision-making orientation toward family needs with a strong emphasis on how the programs impact the integrity of parents (Powell, 1988; Pence, 1988; Swick, 1991). Too often, parent or family involvement is given superficial treatment in programs for children. This thinking pattern works as follows: when and if the needs of the children are met, some activities will be directed toward the parents. Yet, children are parts of dynamic ecologies called families and relate much of what happens to them to their primary social identity. Programs that attempt to treat children in isolation from their families are indeed failing to reach children in their most comprehensive sense, that is within the ecology of the family.

The major emphasis in early childhood programs must be on strengthening the child's total ecosystem, which is centered in the parent's control scheme. Priority should be placed on valuing the integrity of parents as the child's most intense and pervasive teacher. This broadens the early childhood educator's decision-making design to include parental effect in their thinking, and shifts the focus to linkages with parents as the key influences on children. The following are questions that reflect this parent- and family-centered paradigm.

- Does the program design reflect a respect for the integrity of parents and the total family ecology?

- Are parents key partners in the decision-making process that is used in planning and implementing the program?

- Does the program place priority on supporting and strengthening parents in their decision-making and control-building skills?

- Are parents included in the educational component of the program both as teachers of their children and as lifelong learners?

- Does the program focus on increasing parental integrity through personal-developmental experiences as well as needed educational and family support services and activities?

This paradigm promotes the idea that autonomous, self-reliant and productive parents will influence children toward becoming positive and effective individuals. It also recognizes that parents need support in the form of resources, education, and social validation in order to develop the integrity required for quality caring. Some early childhood advocates have recognized the paramount role of parents and oriented their programs on a parent-family-centered focus. Ira Gordon's parent education efforts were directed toward increasing parental teaching skills which in turn did increase their efficacy in relating to their children (Swick, 1984). More recent efforts such as the "Parents as Teachers Project" (White, 1988), the "Parent-Child Centers" (Powell, 1989), the "Kenan Family Literacy Project" (Darling, 1989), and a plethora of other parent/family programs (Swick, 1991) have focused on increasing parental integrity through education, support, and related parent/family strategies.

Efforts to raise the status and functioning of parents warrant continued emphasis. The following directions should serve as guidelines for all concerned with children and families.

- Recognition of the significant role parents play in early childhood should be in evidence in all aspects of program development, particularly through the engagement of parents in partnership roles with professionals.
- Early contact and relationship-building with first-time parents is essential to understanding their position in life and to becoming allies with them in the family development process.
- Involvement of parents in decision making that influences them, their children, and ultimately their view of family and society should become inherent in program development and activities.
- Appropriate individualized education and training opportunities for parents that enable them to strengthen both their personal identity and to increase their level of effectiveness in parenting roles should be considered as essential to quality programs.
- Development of parent-professional alliances that are used to establish continuous supportive interactions between the parent and the early childhood educator. This form of networking can serve to broaden the professional's position in supporting parental integrity and to bring parents into the center of program developments.

Part Four

PARENT EDUCATION AND FAMILY SUPPORT

Parent education and family support during the early childhood years has emerged as a major prevention and intervention process. Every major national report on improving children's lives recommends increased attention be focused on educating and supporting parents and families. Indeed, recent research reports suggest that "education and support" become dynamic parts of a comprehensive family-centered effort (Hamburg, 1992). This part of the book explores the parent education and family support aspects of parent involvement. Since these two dimensions of parent and family involvement are clearly interrelated, they are treated as interactive elements within the ecology of early childhood education.

Chapter Twelve focuses on the "parenting aspect" of parent education. It articulates the initial needs of parents that parenting programs should address. In particular, the kinds of developmental and personal issues that arise in parenting young children are addressed. A section on "insights on program design" examines the developmental and ecological issues that programs should consider. Additional ideas are shared on educating parents relative to the resources that are present within the family and on how they can capitalize on these resources. Finally, some basic guidelines are presented for professionals to use in developing effective programs. This chapter precedes the material on defining parent education because the significance of the personal dimensions of parent-needs is the very foundation of the etiology of parent educational efforts (Swick, 1984).

The changing nature of parent education as well as the complexity of situations facing parents has challenged early childhood educators in designing effective programs. **Chapter Thirteen** examines the critical issues in parent education, particularly the changing meaning of the term and the changing nature of parenting. A brief description of one possible professional-parent role design is also presented. The emphasis is on stimulating professionals to review their perspectives related to working with parents. Ideas on reaching "hard to reach" parents and on responding to the needs of dysfunctional parents is also briefly discussed. Finally, some suggestions are presented on building a community support system for promoting parent education. A predominant theme in this chapter is that parenting and parent education will continue to evolve and change in response to and in interaction with a changing social ecology (Powell, 1989).

Chapter Fourteen includes a description of sample parent education and family support programs. The criteria for developing quality programs is related to these program samples. The emphases in this chapter are on the strategies that programs have found effective in working with different parent populations as well as on techniques that work with families in at risk situations. The concept that "strategy" is more perspective and approach than solution is explored within an empowerment framework. **Chapter Fifteen** examines the special role that schools can play in supporting families, inclusive of educational, social, and related activities. The material presented in this chapter emphasizes the linking of school and family to create a learning paradigm that reflects a partnership process. Finally, **Chapter Sixteen** looks at support strategies that are present in other community organizations. Informal community supports are given special attention. The defining role that communities play in shaping the broad system by which families and schools can actualize their talents is also discussed.

The pervasive message in this part of the book is that parents and families have changed dramatically, and that early childhood educators need to respond to these changes with effective educational and support efforts. Strategies, ideas, resources, and materials are presented that support this needed focus within the early childhood professional's work.

Chapter Twelve

Parent Education: Focus On Parent Needs And Strengths

The emerging focus in early childhood parent education is on the diversity of parent needs that arise in a multicultural and rapidly changing society. For example, programs have been developed to serve teenage parents, parents of exceptional children, and parents confronting multiple problems. Most of these programs have focused on providing parents with information and skills on child care, parenting, special topics, and on the importance of their role as parents (Cataldo, 1987). More recently, it has been recognized that important *parenting processes* need attention too! While it is certainly critical for parents to gain competence in child development and learning, their own personal development is also significant. In effect, parents need to gain insight into their own development, how these developmental processes influence their parenting, and how they can gain competence in this developmental journey (Galinsky, 1987).

An Initial Focus For Parent Education

The foundation of the competent parent is within their personal development. Thus, initially the thrust of programs should be on the *personal dimensions of parenting*, with particular emphasis on the developmental and ecological factors that are influencing this process. Cataldo (1987), Bronfenbrenner (1979), Brooks (1987), and White (1988) have identified critical elements of the parenting process that should be addressed in early childhood parent education programs.

- *The ecological influences impacting the lives of parents and children* should be studied and used as a basis for selecting program content as well as process. For example, what particular values do parents consider important to themselves and their children? Value differences need to instruct program strategies and activities, thus promoting respect among parents and professionals (Powell, 1988). What kinds of support systems exist for families to use in carrying out their roles? Depending upon the context that parents experience, their perception of their supports will vary greatly. Traditional parenting programs often fail to explore this dimension and suffer poor participation and weak parent responsiveness

(Swick, 1991). Further, what are the particular strengths and challenges confronting parents? Parents may have (and probably do have) many creative ideas on child care and family life. Too often professionals overlook these aspects of the program-parent match. Ecological data on parenting and family life is critical to program development.

- *The developmental needs of parents should be addressed at the outset* of educational programs for parents. The emphasis should be on involving parents in articulating the kinds of developmental needs they are experiencing. The developmental shift that occurs in early childhood is as dramatic for parents as it is for children (Galinsky, 1987). Yet, parents must also negotiate their personal, work, and related needs while integrating the new demands of parenthood (Jaffe & Viertel, 1980). This process can be further complicated by particular context factors such as single parenthood, teen parenthood, foster parenting, and other factors. Perhaps, as Powell (1989) has noted, parent education arrangements may offer a valuable service by engaging parents in discussions related to their perceptions of developmental needs. An extension of these discussion sessions might be the offering of information and strategies related to parental involvement in positively handling these developmental challenges (Swick, 1984).

- *First-time parents need special attention and support in responding to developmental and ecological challenges.* The initial experience of becoming a parent offers parent educators an opportune time for developing an alliance that can be mutually supportive. During the first three years of parenting, parents and children form relationships that influence them throughout the life span. It is during this period of family development that parents show the most interest in learning about child care, family relationships, and their personal development within the parenting role. Brooks (1987) suggests the involvement of parents in identifying the issues they are most interested in as each parent population has different priorities. Yet, as White (1988) suggests all parents are interested in learning about how to best support their child during infancy and toddlerhood.

- *Preventive approaches to educating and supporting parents are most effective when they focus on the positive aspects of parenting.* Positive and nurturing staff attitudes play a major role in establishing an inviting atmosphere for parent participation. Providing specific preventive services (health care, adult education, quality preschool programs, opportunities for parent networking—as examples) sets the stage for gaining parent confidence in program activities. Gordon (1976) found that parent sharing, using parents as resource persons, and involving parents in activities they perceived as useful were helpful in increasing parent participation in all aspects of parenting. As Dunst, Trivette, & Deal (1988) indicate, parents and families must be intimately involved in shaping the goals and strategies of prevention-oriented efforts. Programs can best support prevention goals by helping parents acquire some basic life control skills. This is especially the case where families are caught up in a cycle of debilitating problems.

- *A major focus in parent education should be on guiding parents toward the construct that children and parents learn from each other.* Helping parents understand the "developmental" needs of this parent-child relationship is the foundation of successful programs. Research supports educational activities that promote in parents the development of nurturing attitudes and behaviors related to family living, and in particular with their children (LaRossa, 1986). The critical role of behaviors such as parent listening, developing family communication rituals, modeling sharing and caring activities, and organizing shared-learning times with children are cited by Lickona (1991) as content parent educators and teachers need to address. Likewise, Swick (1987) suggests these same types of behaviors should be promoted as "basics" for parents in relation to their personal and marital/friendship interactions.

As parents gain insight into the dimensions of parenting (as they are experiencing them), both parental and personal, they are more likely to shape their behavior toward constructive and responsive ends. Insightful parents who have developed from the outset of family development nurturing and reflective ways of living, are more involved in their children's total development (Galinsky, 1987).

Insights On Parent Education Program Designs

Developmental and ecological research has identified particular insights that can have positive influences on parent education program designs (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Erikson, 1982; Ford & Lerner, 1992). The following are insights that have emerged from this research. In examining the following insights professionals will want to give particular attention to the unique aspects of the families they work with and to the communities in which their work takes place. In a sense, these insights serve as the building blocks of parenting and parent education because they address the intimate elements of parenting as a process.

Insight One: *Just as children function at different levels of development, so do parents!* Unfortunately, many parent education programs are geared toward meeting generic needs that are addressed in group sessions. While such program activity can be beneficial, the diversity of parent needs requires individualization of parent education (Powell, 1989; Swick & Bollinger, 1980). For example, while some parents may have a positive history of parent-child relationships others may find nurturance and attachment to be threatening ideas. The assumptions that many parenting programs operate on need to be translated into meaningful content for parents. In particular, the concept of development within parenting, child development, and family living needs discussion, practical application, and realistic strategies for parents to experiment with. As Jaffe & Viertel (1980, p. 319) found after interviewing many different parents who were functioning at different levels of development:

> If one general theme did seem to recur in our interviews, it was a very broad one, and a difficult one to talk about: the maturation process. *The struggle to become parents is a struggle to become grown.*

As strategies are selected and content modified to be responsive to these individual needs, parent educators and teachers can have a very positive influence on the development and growth of parents. The focus needs to be on the positive, growing aspects of the developmental experiences of parents as well as on ways parents can position themselves to promote this positive approach.

Insight Two: *The context in which parents and children function needs to be considered when organizing parent education programs.* For example, the very young parent will likely have a set of different situations than parents who are more experienced. This does not mean that one is a better parent than the other, rather it is a signal of different needs, strengths, and challenges (Swick, 1987). In some cases (such as where a difficult divorce has taken place or where the family has experienced severe illness), the needs are clear and call for specific supports. Yet in other cases where parents themselves are struggling to understand particular needs, teachers and parent educators will need to form a supportive and more intensive relationship with them. Context also offers professionals the opportunity to learn about how parents in different cultures handle problems, care for their children, and view themselves in different roles (Chavkin, 1993). *Context understandings should be used as a means of empowerment, not as barriers* (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bringing parents together from different cultures, varying contexts, and diverse experience-levels can enhance everyone's understanding of parenting and family life as a growing process.

Insight Three: *The hierarchy of human needs as articulated by Maslow (1959) needs to be integrated into parent education planning.* The same needs of love, trust, security, health, exploration, and individuation that children need to experience are relevant to parental development. Healthy parents feel secure, enjoy personal growth, and engage in developmental activities that help them to become more effective. Educational and support programs should emphasize the emotional and social support that parents need to attend to in their own development as well as their children's.

As Jaffe & Viertel (1980, p. 319) report "the growth spurt associated with the first year of parenting is probably the most intense, compact and pressurized period of growth in a young adult life." To meet the demands of this intense and complex experience, parents must be secure in their identity as growing and learning persons. Even in later stages of development, parents experience multiple challenges (job changes, changes in family needs, natural life stress—as examples) and need activities that enable them to find "personal strength" in who they are and in how they are responding to personal and parental issues (Bettelheim, 1987). Data from two areas of study support this focus on parents' basic human needs. Kempe & Kempe (1978) and Blazer (1989) note, in their synthesis of research on parent and family dysfunctions, that parents who abuse children are typically insecure, lonely, and generally lacking in self-social competence. On the positive side, White (1981) noted that effective parents exhibit a personal sense of control over their lives and that this competence is also translated into their involvement with their children.

Bettelheim (1987) suggests that parent educators support parents in developing proactive self-assessment and self-refinement skills. His suggestion is couched in terms of a caring, self-development sense. He strongly advocates that professionals address the inherent strengths of parents, thus enabling them to nurture themselves in positive ways. Involving parents in exploring the intricacies of their personal status (rest, nutrition, social involvement, educational interests) is a beginning point that parent educators might explore.

Insight Four: *Parents must have adequate support persons and resources by which they can empower themselves as parents and as unique persons* (Hamburg, 1992). From the beginning of life this need for reciprocal supportiveness among people has been observed, particularly in the infant-mother relationship. This initial thrust toward bonding and attachment is the beginning of a style of nurturing and caring that echoes throughout human relationships. With parents this process is critical to their identity as nurturing individuals. Yet they must have experiences in which they find nurturance and support (Lancaster, Altmann, Rossi, & Sherrod, 1987; Stern, 1977). Parents who have developed and nurtured a supportive ecology (particularly in terms of caring relationships with significant others) are likely to exhibit this with their children. Parents who have adequate external supports are more likely to function effectively than parents who lack needed external resources (Pence, 1988).

Two examples of this process are cited by Bronfenbrenner (1979). The first deals with single parents who have support systems as opposed to those who either lack them or who have very minimal supports. Supportiveness strengthens the single parents' functioning, especially with regards to their carrying out affective relationships with their children. Single parents who lack such supports tend to be less effective in their parenting roles. The second example relates to how parents perceive their support systems. Bronfenbrenner gives the example of the parent who views their child's day care as less than desirable. The perception itself creates stress and concern within the parent and is likely to negatively influence their parenting. Parents themselves point to the lack of significant personal resources (close friendships, for example) and a lack of needed support systems (needed leave time from work, for example) as being negative factors in their parenting and family functioning (Swick, 1987).

Parent educators and teachers of young children can provide three distinct supports in this regard: provide parents with information on the need to relate proactively to their environment, engage parents in building support systems through parent networking and activities like "preschool parent clubs," and by bringing parents into contact with needed support services.

Insight Five: *Early childhood educators need to reach parents early in the family's journey.* First-time parents, for example, are typically highly interested in learning about child development, family development strategies, and related topics. New parents are generally eager to do what is best for the child (White, 1975; 1988). They are particularly interested in gaining information and resources that will enable them to provide their children with quality health, social, and educational care.

This part of parenthood includes the most emotional upheaval that parents ever experience. The exhilaration of being involved in the beginning of a new life (for the child and themselves) and the often anxious periods of recognizing the immense journey ahead literally shake the foundation of many marriages (Jaffe & Viertel, 1980). In addition, the lifestyle changes that accompany this stage of life are very intensive. Preparation for dealing with this experience (or more accurately this set of experiences) by reorganizing schedules, arranging a positive family environment, securing and strengthening marital relationships, becoming comfortable in a new role, and acquiring some basic understanding of the needed support systems for nurturing a young child are all vital parts of the *curriculum for first-time parents*. Bettelheim suggests that professionals working with parents in this new experience focus on helping them adapt to the physical, social, emotional, and spiritual changes that accompany this process. Galinsky (1987) advocates a supportive and experienced-based approach that builds positive self-concept in parents.

Parent educators as well as other helping professionals have an excellent chance to engage new parents in initiating proactive, positive, and nurturing family dynamics. The key is to help new parents create positive images of themselves as parents and persons and to assist them in acquiring needed resources for actualizing these images. Of particular interest is the positive impact "adopt a parent" and "parent mentoring" programs have had. In such efforts, an experienced and caring parent forms a supportive partnership with the new parent and funcions in a mentoring and nurturing capacity (Dunst, Trivette, & Deal, 1988)

Insight Six: Unfortunately, and often due to negative feedback from significant others, many parents are reactive instead of being proactive family leaders. A major need in the parent education arena exists in this area of *supporting parents in becoming proactive, developing their control skills*. In his work with parents Gordon (1975) noted that parent education could not only have a positive impact on children but also play a critical role in improving parents' self-image. It is essential that parents establish control and direction relative to their personal and family lives early in the parenting journey. One of the correlates of ineffective parenting is a lack of personal control over the environment (White & Kaban, 1979).

Maintaining a sense of control involves planning, organizing, assessing, and refining personal values in relationship to personal and family dynamics. It is a continuous process involving parents in both developmental and ecological adjustments and adaptations (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Learning to manage time, set priorites, and use human resources within a family and marital ecology impacts one's personal system in significant ways. Parent educators and teachers of young children can support this personal refinement process through programs that offer ideas and strategies, through individual supportive interactions with parents, through community awareness activities, and in many other dimensions. The critical aspect of this insight is that parents need support in moving toward a more team-oriented style of living, which is indeed a natural adaptation process that comes with family life if it is supported within the ecology (Bettelheim, 1987).

Emerging from the above insights is one construct that deserves special discussion, *the construct of teaming as it evolves within family dynamics.* In too many cases parent education has slighted this dimension of parenting, often taking for granted that parents already have this skill area refined. Yet the literature indicates it is one of the major needs and challenges parents face, particularly during the family's formative period of development (Bradshaw, 1988; Galinsky, 1987).

A Team Approach To Parenting

Teaming is an essential part of family life if indeed parents and children are to be productive in their lives. Parents need to know that it is a positive approach to involve relatives, friends, and community support persons and resources in the family building process (Stinnett, 1982). They need to know what and where these resources are and how to best organize them within the process of developing as a family. While many parents are aware of the significance of this process, in some cases it is the lack of teaming that inhibits parents and children in their developmental journey. As Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. 7) notes:

> Parent's evaluations of their own capacity to function, as well as their view of their child, are related to such external factors as flexibility of job schedules, adequacy of child care arrangements, and the presence of friends and neighbors who can help out in large and small emergencies, the quality of health and social services, and neighborhood safety.

In functioning families, the natural supports within the system serve as a resource for strengthening parents. In cases where both parents are present and functioning as a team, many practical needs can be met such as feeding, handling child care routines, managing family events, and related activities. Where older siblings are present their involvement can be appropriately used to balance many family demands. Indeed children learn many caring and related social skills within this teaming process (Eisenberg, 1992). In single-parent families, the use of friends, relatives, and other resources can and should be used to foster reciprocal patterns of family living (Cochran & Henderson, 1990). Of special significance to parent educators and other helping professionals is the family's early development of proactive and nurturing relationship patterns. Teaming and other supportive behaviors are best learned within a setting where parents are alert to the need for creating positive emotional and social habits (White, 1988). In effect, probably the most important thing new parents do is to establish their nurturing partnership as a model for the family's evolving lifestyle (Bradshaw, 1988).

Significant resources external to the family (yet closely interrelated with everything families do) include community agencies, business, industry, neighborhood groups, religious organizations, and other informal support groups that have a direct bearing upon the status of the family (Garbarino, 1982). For example, leaders in business and industry need to consider how their working practices effect the lives of parents and children. The use of well-planned maternity and paternity leave policies as well as "family-friendly" workplace supports can enable parents to be more involved in family development activities. With the complexity of today's work and family challenges, parents need knowledge and support in creating a "match" between these forces (Kamerman & Hayes, 1982; Swick & Rotter, 1981). Workshops, parent support groups, educational programs for business leaders, and related community activities can promote a climate of support for better family-workplace relationships.

Ultimately, *parental attitudes* permeate every aspect of the family's development. A positive psychological view of life and of the parent-child relationship can establish a setting where minor problems and normal conflicts are solved in a productive manner. Research has confirmed that parents who have developed a healthy psychological perspective about themselves, their families, and their work are more likely to have a positive influence on children than parents who are insecure and negative in their daily activities (Bigner, 1985; Caldwell, 1989; Gordon, 1976). Family support professionals need to assist parents in realizing how their psychological attitudes permeate everything they do with children. In addition, parenting programs should include content that informs parents of resources and strategies they can use in fostering positive mental health in themselves and family members.

Guidelines For Early Childhood Educators

The focus of parent education needs to be expanded and refined to include the realities of parenting that are so often taken for granted and thus ignored. While many programs have been successful in helping parents understand the child in their family, there has been less success in helping parents develop an empowering understanding of themselves and their needs and roles as parents. The following are some guidelines family support professionals can use in creating viable programs and practices for and with parents.

- *Begin with the premise that parents are learners.* That is, professionals should interact with parents as learners, not focusing on deficits that may hide many parental talents and skills. In some manner or another all parents want to add to their understanding of themselves, their children, and the family's total functioning. This is especially the case with new parents who typically are eager to learn as much as they can about parenting, child development, and family life (White, 1988).

- *Recognize that many parenting behaviors are developed early in the parent/family journey.* As White (1988) indicates, the most effective parent education efforts have been with first-time parents and have focused on the total family context within the first three years of life. The empowerment that comes from gaining confidence in one's skills during this time serves as a preventive force throughout the family's development. In particular, parents acquire an emotional and spiritual lifestyle that serves as a mindset for later functioning. This preventive emphasis should be the foundation of every parent education program (Cataldo, 1987).

- *Articulate a continuing learning and development relationship with parents.* While the early years of parenting serve as the foundation, continuing renewal and adaptive education and support are essential to parent and family growth. Recognize the developmental and ecological situations parents face at varying points in life as "content" for parent education. Also, take note of the unique and individual needs of each parent as well as the cultural influences that impact the lives of parents. A developmental-interactionist perspective is essential to the formation of effective programs and practices (Galinsky, 1987; Powell, 1989).

- *Involve parents in the planning and functioning of parent education experiences.* In too many cases the personal needs that parents see as vital to their growth are absent from program activities because they have not been involved. Create systems in which parents are continuously engaging us as professionals in being sensitive to their views about what is important to them and their children. In effect, the dynamics of personal and parental roles need to be included in the content of parent education (Swick, 1984; 1987).

- *The psychological aspects of parenting should serve as the primary basis upon which all other program content is based.* Most parents are effective with children (or at least moving in the direction of being caring and effective parents) when their personal development and marital or friendship relationships are positive and nurturing. The healthy adaptation to parenting and family life occurs best when parent education supports both the personal and parental dimensions of the developing adult who is taking on the parenting task (LaRossa, 1986).

Chapter Thirteen

Parent Education: Meaning And Critical Issues

With the recognition that parent education must initially focus on the needs and strengths of parents, it is also vital that the meaning and critical issues in this domain be articulated. Just as parenting has changed in response to social and cultural changes, their means of acquiring information and skills for parenting has also changed. While parents in early American history relied primarily on the Bible, they were politically adept at drawing up community norms to guide their parenting behavior. Just as parents were held accountable by community norms, their independence was respected except for extreme neglect. As our society became more complex parents began to seek assistance in improving their effectiveness. With this broadening of perspectives on parenting and child development came more diverse ways of carrying out the parenting role. An increasingly industrialized economy also stimulated new forms of parenting and family life. The first White House Conference on Children, was in part, prompted by the concerns of parents as well as those of social workers and educators. With increased knowledge on how children develop and information on effective parenting gaining credence, the idea of the *modern parent* began to emerge (Hymes, 1972; Rosenberg, 1975). The concept of parenting thus evolved within the dynamics of an evolving industrial and technological society.

Three historical trends have shaped the parent education field: the evolving complexity of society; the increase in knowledge related to child development/learning, parenting and family life; and the recognition of the critical role parents play in the development and learning of children. In this context, *the meaning of parenting and parent education* have taken shape during the "modern era" of civilization (Cheal, 1991).

The increasing complexity of society spawned a rich diversity of life styles and increased the level of human functioning necessary for successful community elaboration. For example, parenting in a basically rural, homogeneous society required simple skills of monitoring the child's development to accommodate a corresponding fixed set of community values. The idea of maximizing a person's development was not accepted as a primary mission of the community, thus parents were not concerned with the "whole development" of the child nor with the self-actualization of themselves. Moral values, job skills, and family-community education was carried out in the home and to a lesser degree in schools and neighborhood places (Rosenberg, 1975).

With industrialization (and later the emergence of the information-age and now the emergence of "post modernism") came new jobs, increased mobility, and the need for a more advanced and sophisticated education among the populace. A part of this trend included the belief that children's development could be maximized under the proper conditions. The parenting role, by necessity, quickly evolved into a more challenging and demanding task. Parents and children were faced with increased societal expectations and demands. No longer could a person accomplish their development and learning within a simplistic system but rather had to engage in extending education and job training beyond the home and immediate community. Parents, who at one time needed children for operating the family system, now found children as "social dependents" who would spend extended time periods in the home. By the very nature of this increased complexity of society, parent-child interactions became more complex—thus requiring more parental insight. As the parenting role became more sophisticated the education and renewal of parents emerged in many different ways (Hymes, 1972).

The development of a knowledge base regarding how children learn and function increased the need for sophisticated parents. While parents have always used some knowledge system in the care of children, it is only in recent times that they have had access to a comprehensive body of information on children's learning and development. For example, the medical, educational, social, and psychological information available to parents regarding children is voluminous and significantly influences the way parents and children interact and function. As is the case with any increase in knowledge, the growing sophistication of child development information has stimulated different perspectives on parenting, child development, and family life. Thus parents are confronted with more choices and decisions related to parenting which also calls for higher levels of thinking and learning. Parents now spend more time learning about parenting and how to improve the family system (Galinsky, 1987).

The recognition of the critical role parents perform in educating children has increased the social awareness for having competent parents. Studies conducted by professionals in various fields have documented the negative impact abusing and neglecting parents have had on their children and themselves (Green, 1982). Other studies have shown how productive parent-child interactions can positively influence the child's development and learning in many modes including language acquisition, social skills, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual development (Gordon, 1977; Rohner, 1986; Stinnett, 1979; White, 1988). Parents have become sensitive to their influence on children and have sought more involvement in the education of their children. Likewise, professionals who work with children and families have recognized the critical role of parents and attempted to provide for this need in their designs for educating young children (Swick, 1987).

The emergence of a formalized body of information on parent education has raised some significant issues relative to the effective development of parents. Questions such as the following are representative of the kinds of concerns early childhood educators need to examine in their development of programs and practices.

- What is meant by parent education? What does it include and what is the primary focus of this area of study?
- What is meant by parenting? What is the parental role and what is the role of the early childhood educator? How can role confusion be avoided by parents and early childhood teachers?
- What is the role of the parent educator? Given the diversity of parenting styles how can parent educators carry out an educational program effectively?
- What is the level of public support for enhancing the role of parents? How can public policy be influenced toward strengthening the direction of empowering parents?
- Given the rapid increase in teen parents, child abuse, and other family situations and issues, how can parent education be effective in designing programs that are of value to different parent populations?
- What strategies can parent educators use in attempting to strengthen their programs in light of different family needs?

These questions are reflective of the issues parent educators and early childhood teachers confront during the 1990s. These issues are briefly explored in the different sections of this chapter.

Parent Education: Toward A Comprehensive Meaning

In contrast to early perspectives on the meaning of parent education, current views emphasize the development of comprehensive designs. This move toward more ecologically based definitions of parent education is in response to both the increased knowledge available in the field and the changing needs of parents and families (Powell, 1989). It is in this sense that the following definition is put forth.

> Parent Education is any guided effort designed to support the empowerment of parents in carrying out their multiple personal, parental, and family roles.

Within the "parent education" definition, the *family support* element is included as a part of the empowerment process. As Weiss & Jacobs (1988) note, the substance of "family programs" (which is inclusive of both parent education and family support services) includes information, emotional appraisal and support, and instrumental assistance. Indeed as Powell (1989) explains, recent usage of the term parent support is reflective of the move toward a broader definition of parent education.

Specific components of parent education are organized to reflect the needs parents have in meeting their various roles and challenges. Specific components usually include the following: information and support related to personal and marital/friendship roles and relationships; information and support on skills and processes related to the parenting process; knowledge and support regarding child development; and specific skill development with regard to needs that arise in particular parent/family situations (Swick, 1984). The diversity of ways these components are organized and used to meet different program needs is articulated by Powell (1989, p. 89):

> The image of parent education as an expert telling a group of mothers about the ages and stages of child development is neither complete nor accurate as a portrayal of many of today's programs. Consider the following contrasts: Some programs focus on family-community relations while others teach parents how to stimulate a child's cognitive development. Some programs prescribe specific skills and styles in relating to young children while other programs encourage parents to become informed decision makers in the use of child development information. Some programs are designed primarily to disseminate child development information to parents while others attempt to foster supportive relationships among program participants. Some programs are highly structured while

others pursue content of interest to the parent participants. In some programs the staff serve as child development experts while other programs adhere to a self-help model with staff in nondirective facilitator roles.

Yet the basic premise of all parent education programs is *that parents are learning and developing persons*. This positive approach capitalizes on the strengths of parents and involves parents in developing their skills within a life span perspective. The integrity of the family is valued and educational and support efforts are directed toward strengthening that integrity. Even where major parent rehabilitation efforts are necessary, decisions are made with respect to maintaining family stability wherever possible. Of utmost importance to parent education and family support efforts is an empathetic delineation of the meaning of parenting and an understanding of parent-professional roles within the process.

Parenting, Parent-Professional Roles, And Teaming

Parenting is perhaps the most complex process carried on within the human development system (LaRossa, 1986). For example, Swick (1991) identifies the following as roles that parents perform within various contexts, particularly in the home and school: *nurturer, teacher, role model, learner, doer, supporter, and decision maker*. The first three roles are rooted in the dynamics of forming family relationships. Typically, they take on the form of nurturing relationships among parents and children, with parents modeling and teaching through the family's many natural interactions. It is the predominant form of parent involvement during the family's formative period of life, usually during infancy and toddlerhood. White (1988) observes that it is during this period of the family's development that children and parents acquire their repertoire of affective and social skills needed for healthy family life and for later use in functioning effectively in school and community settings. *This involves parents in using processes where they nurture each other, their children, and those significant adults and helpers who become part of the family's journey* (Galinsky, 1987).

Parents expand their participation in children's development and learning through the use of learning, supporting, doing, and decision-making roles. In the learning role, parents acquire knowledge, skills, and resources that strengthen them and their family. In support roles, parents not only assist their children but critically, they support teachers and other community professionals who help the family. Naturally, effective parents are doers, they help to negotiate the world for and with each other and their children; which inevitably involves them in decision-making activities (Swick, 1984).

Clearly, parents need a support team in order to carry out these roles with effectiveness. Thus, a *parenting team* concept is the most viable way of understanding how parents and community carry out the human development process. The parenting team is comprised of parents, professionals, and helpers of all sorts who work jointly to foster healthy child and family development.

> **Parenting team** members may include pediatricians, teachers, child care professionals, counselors, friends, ministers, homemakers, social workers, and many other people who support the development and learning of children and their parents.

Teachers, for example, perform distinct support roles in their involvement with children and parents. In particular, they carry out nurturing, teaching, guiding, and decision-making roles. The nurturing that teachers and caregivers bring to children and parents can reinforce the caring lifestyle begun in the home. Their support of children provides yet another source of adult validation and enrichment. In the guidance role, teachers may help parents expand their parenting skills and/or provide children with needed direction for becoming more self-reliant.

Indeed, *the parenting team concept places the parent-professional role relationship within the context of a positive framework.* Such a paradigm advocates an interactive and mutually empowering relationship between parent and professional. In this perspective, a mutual respect between parent and professional is essential to the formation of a productive relationship. The professional understands the parent as the team leader and utilizes parent skills in carrying out major efforts directed toward child and family improvement. The parent sees the professional as a skilled helper in expanding the family's reach toward competence (Swick, 1984).

Parents and teachers use particular roles to carry out this partnership-building process: *collaboration, communication, planning, and evaluation* (Swick, 1991). **Collaboration** is the core of the parent-professional relationship. It involves parents and teachers in working together on virtually all aspects of the growth process as it occurs within the family-school learning arrangement (Comer & Haynes, 1991). It is a process by which parents expand both the child's and their environment through continuous, **planned** interactions. It is a joint venture where parents and their professional helpers work toward maximizing the potential of everyone involved in the human development process.

The growth process is rapid and intensive in children, parents, and professionals during the early childhood years; **communication** is the means by which these partners support and enrich each other's growth. **Feedback**, in the form of continuing constructive **evaluation**, allows the parent-professional partnership to change as conditions, development, and needs require. It is the part of the collaboration effort that, for example, offers parents and teachers (or say parents and pediatricians) an opportunity to observe children's growth (and their own), to share with each other their perceptions of that growth, and to then engage in planning how best to facilitate it in both school and home settings (Swick, 1992).

Inevitably, in any relationship process, conflicts will arise over differences in views and over role-confusion. Schaefer (1983, p. 11) provides one model of parent-professional role clarification that is helpful in avoiding or dealing with such role confusion.

A Parent-Professional Role Clarification Matrix

	Family	*Institution*
Parent Roles	Caregiver	Volunteer
	Teacher	Fund Raiser
	Model	Paraprofessional
		Observer, Learner
		Decision maker
Reciprocal Roles	Advocate	
	Planner/Organizer	
	Case Manager/Coordinator	
	Collaborator	
Professional Roles	Family Helper	Caregiver
	Parent Educator	Teacher
	Parent Consultant	Model

This visual map of parent-professional roles provides a *starting point* for discussion, study, adaptation, and refinement. It is a way of enabling parents and professionals to negotiate their partnership in a manner that sustains their goals. Additional "models" are available in the work of Comer (1986), Epstein (1984), Rich (1987), and Swick (1991).

Early Childhood Parent Educator Role: Meeting Diverse Needs

The formalization and emergence of the role-person *parent educator* reflects the emergence of the need for a professional who is skilled in helping parents empower themselves and their families. The focus of parent educators, as this role has evolved, is on supporting parents in strengthening their position as family leaders. Ira Gordon (1975) identified three specific roles for this person: *educational, social, and support.* His emphasis was on the teaching and support roles that parent educators might bring to the dynamics of parenting. He saw this as a partnership process to be shared by parents and professionals.

Parent educators, depending on the needs and emphases of the program, take on various role-assignments: coordinator of activities, home visiting, bridge-builder between school and family, facilitator, coordinator of services, and many other roles (Swick, 1984). Indeed the global nature of the role "parent educator" has stimulated concern and debate regarding the primary function of this person. Some scholars suggest that this person be assigned to "educational" functions only, with support services being provided through other collaborating agencies (White, 1988). Others note that the very complexity of parent and family needs require that the parent educator be able to carry out multiple functions (Powell, 1989). A synthesis of the different roles typically performed by parent educators is presented as follows.

Parent Educator Roles

- *Educational and training role* as indicated in the performance of information sharing and conducting of training programs for parents.
- *Helping role* as indicated in informal counseling, provisions for parent support services, and continuing interactions with parents.
- *Bridge-building roles* as indicated in efforts to develop positive and proactive relationships between parents and schools and/or with other agencies.
- *Resource coordination role* as indicated in program planning, linking parents with needed support services, and as in aiding parents in starting social support groups.
- *Interagency collaboration role* as indicated in coordinating and planning with other agencies to bring about a cohesive and effective family support effort in the community.

Because of the different roles performed by parent educators, a more elaborate definition of titles and corresponding job descriptions are emerging. *Family Educator, Family Visitor, Teacher/Parent Educator*, and *Home Visitor* are some of the titles often used to describe this role-person (Cataldo, 1987). In particular, schools are beginning to train and use professionals and paraprofessionals in "blended" school-home educational and support roles. This is especially evident in the emerging family-centered direction that many early childhood programs are exploring. Swick (1992, p. 59), in commenting on the success of a school sponsored school-family early childhood program, noted that:

> A key part of this process was the *utilization of a paraprofessional in the role of a full-time home-school worker.* The visibility of at least one team member devoting full time to actualizing a philosophy of school-family curriculum involvement sends a message to parents and staff that this is indeed a serious and priority concern of the school. Just as important, it also provides teachers with a resource and support person to work with on carrying out family involvement activities that in the past were beyond the reach of their energy.

The meeting of diverse needs requires that personnel in the parent educator role build trusting relationships with parents and families. They need to be seen as "helpers," not "barriers." Sensitivity to specific cultural, social, and educational values of parents and families is essential in this trust-building process (Fantini, 1980). The involvement of parents in the development of plans to meet their needs (as they perceive them) is a priori to the success of the mission of parent educators (Dunst, Trivette, & Deal, 1988). Ultimately, the guiding principle that parent educators should follow is that they are in a helping role that requires the development of mutually rewarding relationships between them and parents.

Public Policy, Parenting, And Parent Education

Unfortunately, in far too many cases parent education has been viewed as a service primarily needed by parents and families with special needs. It is true that parent study groups have existed for almost two centuries, but these efforts have not become pervasive elements in the lives of most parents. The attitude, until recently, has been a "hands off" policy; a view that families should be left to their own resources. Tragically, families—as well as the community—have suffered from this perspective. *Two factors have combined to alter this outmoded perspective:* a dramatic increase in parent/family problems, and increasing evidence that effective parents have a major positive impact on the family and the society (Swick, 1987). Fortunately, we are beginning to see that all families need support in the form of parent education. It is now a matter of shaping public policy efforts to integrate this need into family-school-community systems.

While the relationship between public policy and family strengthening efforts is not totally clear, it is evident that policymakers need to be involved in promoting the exploration of strategies that hold promise for creating more supportive environments for parents and children. This is particularly the case with support strategies that promote in parents a stronger sense of control over their lives with regard to bringing them into more positive relationships with their children and the community (Epstein, 1985; Kagan, 1987).

The challenge of negotiating the family's developmental needs within a complex society such as ours requires a high level of support and information so that parents (and their helpers) can maximize their efforts to nurture children toward success. Areas that have emerged as needing special attention in the public domain include, for example, health care, child care, safety, literacy needs, economic resources, family time, and related areas such as emotional support (Skolnick, 1991). A "hands-off" policy in the public domain in regard to parent/family education and support is and has been an inhibiting if not degrading influence on the lives of every citizen. Just as our nation engages in economic, military, and physical infrastructure planning on a continuing basis, so it must also engage in the ongoing study and planning of improving the infrastructure of families.

Specific needs and issues that require urgent attention as related to strengthening parents and families include: improved and affordable health care, new policies that support the early development of families, systematic parent information and support programs, community-based mental health services, quality and affordable child care, and meaningful school-community designs (Hamburg, 1992).

The development of public policy that supports parent education and family support programs is achievable as Head Start and similar child and family success stories indicate. The success of *Parents As Teachers in Missouri is another example of how policy can become practice. Five elements seem essential to having a positive influence on policy makers with regard to the actualization of parent education:* a clear delineation of program goals, supportive research and documentation regarding the effectiveness of program strategies, involvement of parents and citizens in shaping the program agenda, adequate time and resources (inclusive of competent staff) to implement the program, and continual evaluation and refinement of program components (Powell, 1989).

The education of policy formulators toward supporting parent education must be a priority within the work of early childhood education. The use of research to support the need for this effort is essential. Additional strategies include the following.

- Policy papers on the needs of today's parents and families for distribution to policy makers.
- Parent initiated advocacy contacts with local, regional, and state/national policy makers on services needed for healthy family functioning.
- Distribute research findings that show positive effects of parent education and family support programs to citizens, particularly those involved in decision-making roles.
- Articulate parent and family services being provided by community, school, church, and social agency groups so that policy makers can see current efforts being supported by local communities.
- Organize interagency efforts to develop "cost effective" programs that complement existing programs.
- Develop "policy influence networks" that impact the decision-making process at all levels in favor of parents and families.
- Educate citizens about the realities, possibilities, and limits that parents and families experience.

As Skolnick (1991) notes, the time for embellishing a "family" that probably did not ever really exist is past. The time for constructive action in the form of meaningful parent education and family support is now—and it is urgent.

Parent Education: Responding To Pathologies

Whenever a society changes as rapidly as ours, some families inevitably experience stress well beyond their resources. The family-society match is so unique within each family that what works for some families is simply totally inadequate for others. Parents and professionals need to be alert to what roles they can perform to support multi-problem families, families that find themselves on or over the precipice of pathology. *Six components to the parent educator role in relating to the situation of pathological family life are briefly explored.*

Awareness Component: A major contribution that parent educators can make is enlightening the public about the existence of family pathologies, their sources and dramatic influences on children and parents. The present "hands off" perspective leads to circular and distorted images of parents and children caught in a cycle of dysfunction. With our increase in knowledge of how families develop multi-problem, dysfunctional patterns of living we now have basic information that needs to be shared community wide. This information, of course, must be integrated into the training of early childhood professionals themselves. The awareness function serves at least two significant purposes: it expands citizen understanding of family life, and it increases public support for family services essential to the nurturance of healthy families (Powell, 1989). Further, and very significantly, such awareness information might well stimulate community assessment of what we expect of parents and families and how we might better support families becoming what they can become, empowered members of the community regardless of their style, structure, or form.

Prevention Component: This component should begin with the premise that all families face the grim reality of becoming pathological without certain support resources. In effect, parent education must become a part of our life-curriculum. In a more directed fashion, "high risk" parent and family situations need to be targeted with appropriate and meaningful parent education and family support services. Nurturing in first-time parents the emotional and social skills and attitudes for healthy marital and family life is critical. Providing needed basic services (prenatal care, decent housing, adequate food, supportive job training) along with continuing parent education have proved to be highly effective in the prevention of dysfunctional family situations (Boyer, 1991).

Diagnostic Component: The early identification of specific family pathologies can lead to effective treatment within a family empowerment process. Weiss & Jacobs (1988) include descriptions of several programs that focus on early intervention, with particular emphases on an ecological approach. The findings of research have identified some of the indicators of family dysfunction (for example, extreme isolation, abusive behavior, and a lack of family bonding). Environmental influences that promulgate family pathologies have also been identified: extreme poverty, drug-dependence, illiteracy, intergenerational abuse patterns, and low-support environments (Powell, 1988). The early identification of "high risk" behaviors in families is more likely when parent educators are in contact with parents during the formative stages of family life. Family therapy, social work case management, and home-based parent education are some of the contexts in which diagnostic and corrective activities occur. The goal of this process is to help parents and families address the risk factors and thus empower themselves before negative behavior patterns become internalized.

Referral Component: Once specific family needs have been articulated, the task is to "match" needs to available community services. This process requires parent involvement in both identifying the needs and in structuring the referral process. Dunst, Trivette, & Deal, (1988) outline a social support system that is inclusive of formal and informal referral services. They utilize a system that includes: identified need (as articulated with intense parental involvement), specified resource or support, action taken, and follow-up evaluation. They emphasize the significant role of informal supports such as relatives and close friends because parents and families tend to be more responsive to these intimate helpers than to more formalized services. The categories of support they identify are: nuclear family, kinship network, informal networks, social organizations, generic professionals, specialized professionals, and policy makers. *The major goal of the referral and social support process is to empower families to articulate their needs and become competent in identifying and using resources to address them.*

Support Component: Beyond the "systems" mode of providing referral and organized support for families is the more global process of creating supportive family environments throughout the society. In effect, parent educators should be a part of this global support system as they help families acquire knowledge, skills, and resources for strengthening themselves within the human development arena. Some examples of "social environmental supports" include: family leave time, flexible work schedules, maternity/ paternity leave, quality child care, safe neighborhoods, stimulating community activities, and related resources. Families who function within culturally rich settings tend to thrive on the available resources. A global empowerment approach is one more element in an overall parent education and family support model (Swick & Graves, 1993).

Follow-Through Component: As families gain competence (whether as a natural outcome of their growth or through directed intervention) they need continuing support and guidance. Their long term health requires constant meaningful interactions with others (professionals and informal helpers) who can provide another feedback dimension. Parent educators can nurture continued family growth by providing resources, reminding parents of the need for keeping in touch with their environment, and by promoting intra-family wellness. Family empowerment is a lifelong process that requires continuing support (Swick, 1987).

Relating to "Hard to Reach" Parents

A persistent problem involves reaching parents who for many reasons tend to avoid educational and support situations that are disparate from their culture. This problem is especially prevalent when programs are too global and of a large group nature. Parents whose values are similar to the sponsoring group tend to participate. Those who view the process as threatening or lacking in meaning, tend to remain isolated. There are strategies that can be used to address this issue. Powell (1988, 1989) suggests looking for a "match" between the needs of parents and the design and activities of the program. He found that when parents were comfortable with the structure of the program (could participate in ways that were meaningful to them) and found the content to be important to their needs, participation in programs increased. He also found that involving parents in the design and organization of programs increased participation. Swick (1992), based on observations of a successful school-home parent education program, notes the following: provide a diversity of means for parents to get involved, offer support services that enable parents to participate (such as child care and transportation), and develop close relationships with parents. Additional strategies and techniques include the following:

Strategies/Techniques For Reaching Parents

- Utilize "neighborhood aides" to visit parents and urge them to participate in program activities. Ira Gordon (1976) used an *each one reach one* approach in his parent training project. Parents identified with peers whom they knew and participation increased.
- Media exposure of parent education activities has proven quite successful. This can occur through local television, radio and newspaper projects. Videotaped parenting programs have also been used in home visit projects and in study group sessions.
- Placing parent education materials in "hot spots" in the community such as pediatric centers, shopping malls, churches, family support agency centers, and in other family oriented places. Many family-centered programs carry on "informal" parent education through video programs and discussion groups while also offering needed support services.
- Home visiting programs carried out early in the family's development are highly successful. Various designs have been used: individual visits, group visits in neighborhoods, and combination home and center based efforts.

Parent Education: Cultural Differences And Learning

In far too many cases, parent education is carried out without regard to the cultural diversity that is certainly present in our society. Lightfoot (1978) describes the "Worlds Apart" syndrome that often negatively influences parent education and family involvement programs. Program content and design may be insensitive to the cultural values of many parents and thus foster conflict before the program is even implemented. Disparate parent-professional views on program directions may be based on incorrect stereotypes of each other, incorrect ideas about the potential of each other, and distorted notions of what the program is about.

When professionals lack a full understanding of the culture of the parents they are working with, they tend to rely on stereotypes—images that usually are very incomplete and often incorrect (Neugebauer, 1992). Cultural stereotypes arise out of the need for individuals to react to something with which they are insecure. Lacking information about an event or person, they then create an image (correct or not) on how to respond. In this subtle manner stereotypes arise and imprison people in the mental images they adopt for use in relation to those who are culturally different.

Multicultural learning among parent educators and parents is absolutely essential to successful parent education efforts. The following are strategies that have proven successful in this regard.

Multicultural Learning Strategies For Parents and Parent Educators

- Parent educator involvement in acquiring accurate and proactive information on the values and attributes of children and parents from different cultures.
- Parent-professional activities that bring them together in warm, supportive interactions where they learn about each other in positive ways.
- Parent-professional involvement in the planning and organizing of parent education activities that reflect their shared thinking and values.
- Family-oriented learning and social activities that integrate cultural learning into the substance of the many interactions of children, parents, and teachers.
- Community wide efforts to educate everyone about the values and strengths of people from different cultures.
- Development of parent education content that is reflective of the cultural values, achievements, and needs of parents involved in the program.

Parent Education: Building a Community Support Base

While there are signs of increasing social concern about parenting and family life, few significant steps have been taken to alter our society in terms of truly valuing parenting. As a society we have kept the same social structures in place while the lives of parents and children have changed in dramatic ways. Today's parents and families function in a complex and ever-changing society. They are not receiving needed supports to deal with the stress that comes with such complexity. Community supports of parenting and parent education/family support are needed to complete the "team" of helpers (Skolnick, 1991).

Parent educators alone can have only a limited influence on parents and families. They (and the parents they work with) need a broad based support system. Communities can provide three very valuable contexts for creating productive parent-professional alliances: *service, support, and collaborative learning*. In the service sense, alliances among community groups that serve parents can strengthen the kinds of resources available to parent educators and parents. While services like health care, job training, and family counseling are present in most communities, their isolation from the parent-professional system is often a problem. Alliances are needed that relate such services to the needs and interests of parents, children, and their helpers, especially during the critical early years. Supportive arrangements are needed to enable parents and parent educators to carry out their roles. Time, resources, and supportive attitudes are essential community values in the parent/parent education paradigm. Collaborative relationships among community groups is another need. New resources can be tapped when groups work together. Finding funds, space, talent, and other resources can be achieved when communities value parenting and family life.

A community support system for parents is needed to validate and sustain their critical role. Examples of substantive community efforts include the following.

- Efforts that are supportive of an empowered community for parenting such as better leave policies for new parents, family leave time, work support practices, plentiful leisure resources, mental health centers, and other family strengthening activities.

- Individual and group initiatives that promote strong parenting such as church-sponsored child care, parent networking, intergenerational supports, and infrastructure resources to meet basic family needs.

- Family-oriented schools that place priority on the "parent perspective" with regard to curriculum, regular communication with parents, and the shaping of parent-teacher partnerships.

- Continuous training of family-helping professionals regarding a parent empowerment paradigm, with the emphasis on utilizing family strengths as the starting point for services.

- Interagency and multidisciplinary teaming among formal and informal family helpers, with the focus on accessing resources to families in the most effective way possible.

The involvement of citizens and community groups in parent/family programs tends to promote two very critical processes: it increases the cultural context for having high expectations for the parenting process (especially regarding parent-child relations); and it promotes a community sensitivity to the need for a total parent/family support system. For example, the involvement of business leaders in adapting the work place to the needs of young families has increased worker productivity and at the same time improved the mental health of families (Swick & Rotter, 1981). Communities that concretely value parenting provide supports that indeed increase the potential for having healthy families.

Parent Education: The Evaluation Issue

The evaluation of any human undertaking is multifaceted and complex. The evaluation of parent education and family support programs is even more challenging because the context is inclusive of so many players (Weiss & Jacobs, 1988). Program designs are so diverse and responsible to many different "masters," thus creating the potential for misguided evaluation efforts. For example, early parent education evaluations (such as conducted within the Head Start program) focused on child outcomes and on very limited cognitive indicators at that. Even "parent-focused" assessments like those of Ira Gordon (1976) were centered on very specific language and cognitive outcomes. Naturally, the results of these early evaluations were not always what the program sponsors had hoped for in their original goals. In effect, many early parent education efforts "oversold" their potential for immediate impact. This is not surprising given the desire of many policymakers to show that early childhood family intervention could have a great impact on the society's future. Fortunately, research and practice have delineated a more sensible and realistic framework for both designing and evaluating programs (Weiss and Jacobs, 1988).

One clear message from the research is that *evaluation should be an integral part of the initial goal-setting process* (Powell, 1988). What are the main goals of the program? How are these goals arrived at? What do they mean in terms of daily program activities? Why are they important? Who decided that they were important? How, who, when, and where will these goals be refined, adapted, and eventually integrated into a larger plan of parent and family support actions? If these evaluative issues are not addressed in the initial stage of program development, the very foundation of the program may be irrelevant to the needs of the parents.

Another observation of importance is related to the nature of the evaluation process: is it inclusive of the critical elements that comprise effective parent education or is it too delimited? While all programs have "desired outcomes," the processes used to achieve these outcomes need to be addressed. The "hidden dimensions" of parent education (Why parents participate? What curriculum content is used? How programs are delivered?—as examples) need to be included (Powell, 1988).

A comprehensive approach to parent education evaluation is critical. Weiss & Jacobs (1988) suggest five criteria areas as a means of determining the comprehensiveness of the parent education evaluation design: inclusiveness, formative data indicators, summative data elements, content focus, and process focus. In other words, the evaluation process should allow for gathering information relative to the goals of the program that provide a formative picture, information that offers a summative view of accomplishments, information on the "content" of the parent education activities carried out, and materials that reflect the processes used to achieve the program's goals. Within this "design," evaluators can determine specific assessment desires relative to parent outcomes, child outcomes, family outcomes, staff outcomes, and related goal-directed indicators. *What is critical is that this process be seen as continuing, ever changing, and related to the needs of the parents and families being served.*

It is also important that *an evaluation system that supports the process of program assessment be in place* (Weiss & Jacobs, 1988). Jacob's describes a 5-Level approach: preimplementation, accountability, program clarification, progress toward objectives, and program impact. Her design provides a system for realizing a meaningful and long-term assessment of parent education programs. A brief explanation of each stage of Jacob's evaluation scheme is presented as follows:

1) Preimplementation: This is the foundation level of all subsequent evaluation. It is often called the "needs-assessment" phase of evaluation. It

is in this phase that the program attempts to define their needs, find a beginning "fit" between the program and the population to be served.

2) Accountability: This "evaluation level" begins immediately with the program's inception as it focuses on *documenting* program activities and the processes that influence the program's emerging identity. It is in this phase that programs gather data on client participation, program services, cost per service, and many other dimensions. This process needs to be both quantitative and qualitative.

3) Program Clarification: This phase of evaluation focuses on obtaining information on the program that can be used to improve it. Staff and parents (as well as community advisory groups) self-assess the program in terms of what is happening, who is being served, how the program is working, and related issues that influence refinements needed in the program. It is in this phase that program goals typically undergo revision and refinement as directed by the assessment process.

4) Progress Toward Objectives: The questions asked at this point in the evaluation cycle focus on *program outcomes*. Are short-term objectives being met? Is the program having a differential effect on different users? It is at this point that data analysis takes on a more refined, specific direction; one that allows for more sophisticated analyses of program data. Yet, the inclusive emphasis remains—the goal being to relate specific findings to the broad mission of the program.

5) Program Impact: This level of evaluation may be quite sophisticated, particularly if the program is a large scale effort. Here the focus is on probing for long-range indicators of "effect" on the population and the community. In smaller programs, the emphasis may be on very clearly delineated long-range goals.

Regardless of the way in which an evaluation design such as Jacob's (1988) is carried out, the real value of the process is in helping the parent educators and the parents in achieving goals they see as meaningful. The real issue in parent education evaluation should be: Is the program becoming empowered, that is, is it energizing the participants toward more positive and meaningful lives?

The Effects of Parent Education and Support

Unfortunately, little research has been carried out on short-term, modest approaches to parent education, such as group meetings, study groups, and similar designs. More intensive and extensive programs have revealed some positive influences on children's learning, parental self-image as well as on parenting behaviors (Powell, 1989).

Research in parent education has noted various program influences that suggest that parental empowerment and gains in child competence are attainable within intensive programs where home visiting and intensive individualized efforts are pursued. Weiss (1988) notes that ecologically based programs that provide intensive educational and social intervention have achieved some success. For example, Cochran (1988) points to increased parental expectations and improved child social skills as indicative of possible outcomes. Dunst & Trivette (1988), using case studies, describe the positive influence of case-management/intensive family support on parents. Improved parent-child interactions and parent care-giving are identified by Olds (1988) as outcomes observed in the program he coordinated.

Long-term improvements in parent and child functioning have been suggested by various studies. Lazar & Darlington (1982) synthesized several macro-changes in child, parent, and family functioning that appear to be related to family-centered early childhood programs: reduction in school failure, increase in completion of high school, reduction in delinquency and adult criminal behavior, improved parenting, and increased employment. One early intervention program in which home visiting was a significant component, for example, found that follow-up data showed a marked increase in the proactive social behavior of the children and parents a decade after the program had ended (Lally, Mangione, & Honig, 1988).

While it is clear that exemplary parent education programs do have a positive influence on children and parents, *the processes and behaviors that lead to such changes are not well understood.* Dym (1988) suggests that we have yet to fully comprehend the intricacies of the family development process or the potential in parent education as an empowerment process for families and communities. In terms of a direction for future study he suggests that the focus be on how parent education can most effectively free the family system to grow toward autonomy, supporting parents and children in their efforts to become proactive members of the society.

Indeed, parent education research has raised more questions than it has answered. Of particular significance is the study of Powell as related to key questions that need further study.

1) What process is used to determine parent education goals, objectives, content, and process? Powell raises this question as a result of findings that

suggest that indicators of ineffectiveness such as low participation may well be symbolic of a poor program-client match. For example, in one study he found that where individual differences in parental needs were not accounted for, the participation rate was low (Powell, 1983). In another study it was found that cultural difference required staff sensitivity to methodologies that were responsive to parent learning styles (Powell, Zambranna, & Silva-Palcios, 1990).

2) Are program activities responsive to the individual needs and interests of parents? Even within program populations there are multiple differences among parents regarding their needs and learning styles. Powell (1988) noted that various studies have cited low participation by high-risk parents as a barrier to their success. He shows how analyses of the programs can rectify this barrier. For example, in a parent support group program he observed that parents who already had an adequate support system wanted more information on child care practices. It is further noted that while home visit strategies are supposedly oriented toward individual family needs, in many cases program content is not tailored to each family's uniqueness (Powell, 1990; Powell & Eisenstadt, 1988).

3) What are the significant factors that influence what actually takes place in different parent-education methodologies? In a review of research Powell notes that in some cases we may not be accomplishing particular goals because what is assumed to be happening in program methods and what is actually happening are distinctly different. Analyses of actual home visits, for example, have indicated variations in what happens, who is involved, and how family needs are integrated into the process (Powell, 1990). In another example, he notes how a parent discussion group was actually dominated by just a few participants until the assumptions underlying the groups' structure were examined and then adjusted to meet the needs of the total group (Powell, 1988).

4) What are the involvement patterns of parents in varying program contexts and how are these patterns influenced by program dynamics? A challenge faced by most all programs is the achievement of meaningful and continuous parent participation. For example (Powell, 1984, 1987, 1990) found that parent participation was influenced by several program factors: goals, activities, delivery systems, staff variables, and the *match between program design and client needs.* Parental perceptions of the meaning of program services appears to be a significant factor. The closer the match between parent-perceived needs and actual program services, the better the participation rate. Closely linked to relevance of program activities is the manner in which services are delivered (Powell, 1988).

5) What types of parent education activities are predominant in programs that successfully engage parents? Responsiveness to parent and family attributes and needs is best realized within the dynamics of program activities. Powell (1989, 1990) observed that far too often program activities are designed without parent input or without regard to the unique attributes of the parents being served. Yet some programs have found success through the use of parent generated activity designs. Others have used modeling, participatory decision making, and experiential learning activities with much success.

6) What are the dynamics of parent-professional relationships within parent education programs and how is parent participation influenced by these dynamics? While the training of parent educators is conceptually linked to the research on helping relationships, the realities are that in too many instances the training and program design are strongly tainted by fiscal, political, and social influences that are insensitive to the critical dimension of parent-professional relationships (Powell, 1984, 1989). For example, it has been noted that when parents feel treated as equals and sense their importance in the program's mission, their overall functioning is strengthened. Use of peer teaching, parent support groups, and other parent-directed strategies appear to bring new and positive leadership direction to programs.

7) What are parental perceptions of their experiences in parent education programs and how can we use this feedback to create more enabling and parent-sensitive programs? A major determinant of continuing involvement in program activities is the way parents feel about their current and past experiences. Powell cites findings that indicate that negative parental perceptions of their involvement in program experiences may in fact reduce their sense of integrity and short-circuit program intent (Powell, 1988). Further, negative or meaningless program experiences influence the future participation attitudes of parents. There are also deteriorating influences on programs: low participation rates, conflicts between staff and parents, and a failure to accomplish the primary mission of supporting and engaging parents.

8) What are the dynamics inherent in changing staff and parent perceptions and behaviors regarding their roles in parent education? Powell (1989) and others (Jacobs, 1988; Weiss & Jacobs, 1988) cite considerable research that establish the significance of parent-professional relationships in parent education. Past work in this area, in fact, was very influential in articulating how negative parent perceptions of staff limited and/or degraded the overall functioning of many programs. Rather than empowering parents, staff that treat parents in diminishing or subservient ways actually create lower self-esteem in many parents. The need is for equitable, warm, and mutually

supportive relationships. We need to know more on how staff and parents can create more nurturing environments; places where each can become stronger and more competent (Powell, 1984, 1988).

Clearly, the research of Powell (1988, 1989), Weiss & Jacobs (1988), Dym (1988), and others (See Swick, 1991) support an added dimension to studying parent education and family support programs. It is a process dimension in that it focuses on the underlying processes that occur in program design and implementation. In particular, the study of elements such as the who, what, how, why, when, and where of parent education can provide new perspectives on how this process might better serve families.

Dimensions of a High-Quality Parent Program

Given the diversity and complexity of parent education programs, the issue of what comprises a high-quality program is often raised by parents and professionals alike. This is a critical issue because in too many cases programs that are designed to achieve quality have never assessed what the criteria really include. Powell (1989) provides four program dimensions that provide a basis for creating quality programs.

1) Collaborative, equal relations between parents and program staff. The results of current research suggest that program staff serve as facilitators of goals and activities *jointly determined by parents and program staff,* and not as experts who assume they know what is best for parents (Cochran, 1988). An example of this approach is the involvement of parents in setting program direction as opposed to a largely one-way flow of decision making. This assures that program content and process are responsive to parent-perceived needs.

2) Balanced focus on both parent and child needs. The focus of programs, based on recent research, is moving toward parent-centered needs as well as continuing the child competence emphasis. The weakness of many programs is their proclivity to emphasize one over the other. The "balance" of program activities assures that the ecology of the family is being nurtured in a comprehensive manner. While some programs designed for "high risk" or "dysfunctional" families may center on the parental needs because of the obvious need to correct abusive behavior, even in such specialized programs a goal should be to eventually integrate the child into the activities.

3) Program is tailored to specific needs of population being served. Powell (1991, p. 2) notes that:

The idea that a particular program model can work with almost any parent has given way to an interest in matching parents to different types of programs. This interest is especially evident in efforts to design programs that are responsive to cultural characteristics and values of ethnic populations, and in programs serving parents living in low-income and high-risk circumstances.

For example, the *Parents As Teachers* program (White, 1988) focuses specifically on first-time parents who do not have a need for intensive rehabilitation. It aims to support parents who are making the transition to parenthood and who are basically functioning in healthy modes. Yet Olds' (1988) describes his program as especially designed to meet the needs of high-risk parents.

4) Open-ended parent-dominated discussion. The application of the principles of adult learning are critical to program effectiveness. Parents internalize new information into a system of existing beliefs. The most effective way for them to alter existing ideas is to experience them and to have many opportunities for discussion. Their dominance in exploring new ideas about child development and parenting promotes the likelihood of change.

From Intervention to Empowerment

Historically, parent education and family support have been approached with caution because of the concern over the invasion of the family's autonomy. Only when the community's well-being is threatened is there wide-spread agreement on intervention. Thus, the move toward parent education as a universal process has met resistance from those concerned about distorting the family-community roles.

Three elements have softened this issue: the reliance on voluntary participation of parents, the dramatic change in the demographic and social context of parenting, and the emerging paradigm of empowerment (Swick, 1991). Each of these elements has positively influenced the development of more responsive parent education and family support projects. They have further enriched citizens' and policymakers' understanding of the proper role of parent education.

The voluntary participation of parents in programs has opened up the very foundation upon which most programs are based. For example, it is now accepted practice to gain parent feedback on the utility of program content. It is also common place for programs to have parent advisory groups and to survey parents on various aspects of the program's development. In effect, intervention is rapidly being replaced by a more empowerment-oriented philosophy (Dunst, Trivette, & Deal, 1988). At the same time as the move toward voluntary participation has taken effect, so has a more family-focused value system within family support groups. The move toward a mutually beneficial partnership within programs is indeed reducing the barrier of a fear over family invasion.

The dramatic change in the social context of parenting has also influenced the move toward more parent education and family support resources. Mobility, longevity, smaller families, increased educational needs, more complex family-workplace variables, and the changing nature of the family as a more nurturant system are some of the key factors that have in fact promoted the need for more parent education (Skolnick, 1991). Perhaps, as Powell (1989) notes, the Family Resource Movement of the 1980s is a significant indicator of this change toward having more empowering community systems for parents and families.

An emerging emphasis on empowerment as opposed to intervention is clearly a major influence on increasing the institutionalization of parent education and family support. The recognition that *healthy families* are the result of highly supportive and nurturing community systems has promulgated much discussion of the role of early childhood family-based efforts. Criminology, medicine, business, and education have come to some common agreement on the need for *an empowerment approach to nurturing parenting and family life.* Bronfenbrenner's (1979, p. 7) observations on this need for an empowerment approach to parenting and family life are convincing:

> Whether parents can perform effectively in their child-rearing roles within the family depends on the *role demands, stresses, and supports emanating from other settings.* Parents' evaluations of their own capacity to function, as well as their view of their child, are related to such external factors as *flexibility of job schedules, adequacy of child care arrangements, the presence of friends and neighbors who can help out in large and small emergencies,* the quality of health and social services, and neighborhood safety. The availability of supportive settings is, in turn, a function of their existence and frequency in a given culture or subculture. This frequency can be enhanced by the adoption of public policies and practices that create additional settings and societal roles conducive to family life.

The focus of the various issues discussed in this chapter are on improving the quality of parenting and family life. Parent education and family support is a process used to improve the possibilities of having quality families. In developing "high-quality programs" the following guidelines deserve consistent attention.

- *Societal values toward parenting and family life* must become more positive through substantive changes in our tax policies, workplace practices, health care system, schools, and overall contextual situations in which parents and children live.

- *Parent education and education for parenthood* must be integrated into the entire community system rather than treated as isolated, well intentioned efforts of professionals alone. Just as we learn about various other life skills, parenting and family life must become topics of continued learning.

- *Changes in parenting and family life contexts* must become the business of every citizen, particularly policy makers. What we do with parents in parent education must reflect the "changed nature" of parenting and family life. This calls for the full presence of parents on planning and development teams that design parent education programs.

- *Community awareness of the importance of citizen involvement* in parenting and child development is essential to any long term success. With the increasing isolation of parents and children from natural support persons, the need is urgent for cross-cultural, intergenerational models of parenting and family life. New ideas are needed on how to be a growing family that has many adults engaged in the human development and learning process.

Chapter Fourteen

Parent and Family Empowerment: Concepts, Programs, and Practices

It is during the early childhood years that parents express the most interest in receiving various support services and educational resources. They actively seek ideas and resources that are useful to them in developing the family's initial focus and style. It is during this formative period of family life that parents shape their key parenting behaviors of *nurturing, teaching, and modeling*. Parent education and family support should focus on the expressed interests of parents during this critical beginning of the family's journey.

The historical roots of parent education are found in the early work of Plato and Aristotle. Both scholars referenced the critical role parents played in the education of children. In 1500 the first "advice book" was published (it dealt with teaching children to talk) and in the 1700s a book was published directed only to the parent audience. Pestalozzi is often recognized as the "Father of Parent Education" as Cataldo (1987, p. 4) notes:

> He (Pestalozzi) stressed the vital role of parents in nourishing the child's body and mind. His notions about children's natural goodness and their learning through concrete experiences and self-activity signaled the beginning of early childhood education philosophies.

As early as 1820 parent magazines and parent study groups were formed. In 1909 a White House Conference on Children was carried out. By the 1920s parent education programs and practices were well established (Osborn, 1991). Parent cooperatives, parent education extension services (carried out by the Department of Agriculture), and family support services such as government sponsored child care and information on nutrition and health emerged as "empowerment" influences throughout the 1930s and '40s (Osborn, 1991). During the 1960s and '70s the focus on early intervention (for example, Head Start) fueled major interest in programs to educate and involve parents, particularly during the preschool years. In more recent years, the move has been toward more comprehensive and intensive services that empower families. A more ecologically based type of parent education and family support has emerged and this approach has emphasized more equal, collaborative, and mutually beneficial relationships between parents and professionals (Powell, 1989).

Family empowerment has emerged as the contemporary theme in parent education and family support activities. As opposed to the once predominant emphasis on "education" as the professional teaching the parent, a more supportive focus has developed. Dunst, Trivette, & Deal (1988, pp. 6-7) describe this focus:

> The ability of families to manage life events effectively as well as gain mastery over their affairs requires that we empower families to become competent and capable rather than dependent upon professional helpers or helping systems. This is accomplished by creating opportunities for families to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to become stronger and better able to manage and negotiate the many demands and forces that impinge upon the family unit in a way that promotes individual and family well-being. . . . To the extent that we do not recognize and explicitly consider empowerment of families as the goal of intervention, we are more likely to fool ourselves into believing that we have done a good job when in fact we have lost an opportunity to enable and empower the family and perhaps have even created dependencies by engaging in noncontingent helping.

Within an empowerment paradigm, parent education takes on a new meaning. It is no longer defined in a limited manner where "education" is simply an information dissemination process. It now becomes inclusive of all of the experiences parents have, particularly as those experiences influence children. The diversity of programs reflects this broader interpretation of the meaning of parent education. Powell (1989, p. 89) summarizes this perspective:

> The image of parent education as an expert telling a group of mothers about the ages and stages of child development is neither complete nor accurate as a portrayal of many of today's programs. *Consider the following contrasts:* Some programs focus on family-community relations while others teach parents how to stimulate a child's cognitive development. Some programs prescribe specific skills and styles in relating to young children while other programs encourage parents to become informed decision makers in the use of child development information.

The contrasts are endless, the examples of diversity are multiple, and the emphases are many (Swick, 1991).

The Foundation Of Parent Education And Family Support

Three elements combine to form the foundation of contemporary parent education and family support efforts: *the family as a learning system paradigm, the complexities of family-society interactions, and the emerging institutionalization of the need for parent education* (Skolnick, 1991).

The notion that in a very real sense *the family is the most powerful learning system* that we ever experience is, of course, not new. Throughout history the family's integral educational role has been recognized if not supported. However, it is in recent times that scholars and practitioners have noted the "systematic" influence of family learning on all other educational and social actions of children (Weston, 1989). The realization that parental attitudes, behaviors, and resources as well as the resulting family dynamics establish a learning paradigm within the family is now "foundational" to our cultural thinking. It is within this *family system* that children acquire values, attitudes, and skills for beginning their journey in life. Whatever happens to one member of the family influences every other member. It is an interactive system within itself and in connection to the many other human learning systems. The recognition of this family as a learning system concept has provided a broader and more meaningful context for approaching parent education and family support (Cataldo, 1987).

The complexities of the family-society relationship is also foundational to the work of parent education and family support. When the society was simpler, basically rural, and primarily homogeneous in values, parenting and family life were also less complex. But the social context of parenting has changed (Skolnick, 1991, p. 11):

> *Three related structural changes seem to have set the current cycle of family change in motion:* first, the shift into a "postindustrial" information and service economy; second, a demographic revolution that not only created mass longevity but reshaped the individual and family life course, creating life stages and circumstances unknown to earlier generations; third, a process I call "psychological gentrification," which involves an introspective approach to experience, a greater sense of one's own individuality and subjectivity, a concern with self-fulfillment and self-development.

With these changes have come dramatic shifts in how parents and children build family life. Child care, workplace stress, new school demands, peer pressures, transformed economic rules, and emerging social changes have combined to create more complex and challenging contexts for families.

Parent education has become an institutionalized process that is highly interrelated with the recognition that families are learning systems and with the continuing alterations in the family-society mix (Cataldo, 1987). Whenever families confront rapid and intense change, societies have to create means by which they can negotiate the new rules and expectations, particularly when these guidelines continually shift and as the underlying sources of support change daily. We saw symptoms of this process in the education of immigrant parents on the social and educational expectations of our society. This "educational" process continues today with information being provided to parents on health, learning, socialization, family management, and other areas that are essential to their functioning as effective parents.

With the recognition that the society's future is intimately connected to the empowerment of families, this institutionalization of parent education will likely increase and become more relevant. Parents are likely to become more involved in the direction of programs, responsive to the need for sharing with other parents, and more sensitive to the "match" between their family life and what happens at work, school, and in the community.

The Distinguishing Features of Emerging Programs

The field(s) of parent education and family support has become so encompassing that Burton White (1988) suggests that the number of programs may actually be in the thousands. They come in many forms and within multiple frameworks. Some programs are short, information-based efforts and others are educational and support oriented. *What are the distinguishing features of viable parent education and family support programs?* In the introduction to their volume on Evaluating Family Programs, Weiss & Jacobs (1988, pp. xix-xxvii) identify **six defining characteristics of family support and education programs.**

- *They demonstrate an ecological approach to promoting human development* in that they foster child and adult growth by enhancing both the family's child-rearing capacities and the community context in which child rearing takes place.

- *They are community based* and sensitive to local needs and resources, even when they have a federal or state sponsor.

- *They provide services in each of the domains typically included within the concept of social support.* They supply *information* (e.g., child health and development and parenting information), *emotional and appraisal support* (e.g., empathy, feedback, and reinforcement to adults in parenting roles and access to other parents) and instrumental assistance (e.g., transportation and referrals to other services).

- *They emphasize primary and secondary prevention* of various child and family dysfunctions.

- *They have developed innovative and multilateral (as opposed to exclusively professional) approaches* to service delivery through such means as peer support, creative use of volunteers and paraprofessionals, and the promotion of informal networks.

- *They underscore the interdependent relationship between family and community.*

During the early childhood years, effective programs focus on four basic themes: providing information and support on critical parenting and child/family issues; involving parents in experiences that enable them to develop positive parenting practices; supporting parents in developing positive and useful family-environment relationships; and assisting parents in preventing or resolving factors that may place them and/or their children at risk (Swick, 1991).

Parent education and family support are complementary and highly interrelated concepts and practices that should be deployed in a systematic manner. They provide the three critical resources that parents seek in forming positive parenting skills: knowledge, support, and resources (Weiss & Jacobs, 1988). In an interactive way, parents approach the process of becoming a family through the dimensions of self as person, self as parent, child needs, parent-child relationships, and developing family needs

(Galinsky, 1987). These dimensions are intimately related to marital and friendship dynamics (Cowan & Cowan, 1991).

Initial Focus: The Developing Parent

During the past two decades, the focus of parent education and family support has shifted toward meeting the needs of the "Developing Parent" first so that the family's leadership is sound (Swick, 1991). The belief is that the initial point of parent education "must focus on the personal dimensions of the parents' developmental status" and the related issues that help them to be effective in both personal and parental roles (Swick, 1991, p. 52). This belief has evolved from and in interaction with the development of a knowledge base on adult development. Ira Gordon (1975) noted the significance of the parents' "personal development" in relation to all other roles they perform. His research found that improved parental self-image positively influenced all aspects of the parent-child relationship. Powell (1988, 1989) discusses the emergence of the "personal dimension" of parental development within a parent education program he directed. He found that *kitchen talk* (informal discussion time) often centered on the personal and developmental needs of parents, so vital to their emergence as positive influences in the lives of their children.

Galinsky (1987) advocates that initial parent education experiences focus on the critical roles of nurturing, teaching, and modeling. She emphasizes that parents need to become comfortable in understanding that their personal growth (particularly the development of a personal and parental image) is integral to being an effective parent. As a part of this process they need support in developing a nurturing image of themselves. Far too often parents are provided materials and experiences that focus on the mechanics of birthing or on the basics of parenting. *Yet their initial need is to develop an image of themselves as loving persons.*

Becoming a parent, like growing as a person, is a relationship-building process that requires one to engage in experiences where they intentionally see themselves in caring roles. **For parents to be able to carry out the teaching and modeling roles, they must first have the foundation of trust in themselves that evolves from their growth as nurturing persons** (Blazer, 1989). Exemplary early childhood parenting and family programs are focused on this critical element of the "Parent as Nurturer." Fortunately, this need has prompted the development of programs that emphasize the process of becoming a parent. Unfortunately, in too many cases the content of these courses is limited to the immediate concerns of birthing, to handling specific mechanical tasks of early parenting, and/or to the special needs of a given parent. The recognition that the personal and marital aspects of the lives of parents are major influences on all other parenting dimensions is stimulating some desired change. Some examples of strategies being used to support the development of the nurturing parent include:

- Engaging parents in self-assessments of their nurturing skills and behaviors.
- Involving parents in discussion and activities that focus on the affective dimensions of parenting.
- Encouraging parents to attend to their personal-developmental needs within the parenting/family context.

Programs such as *Head Start, Parent-Child Centers,* and *Child And Family Resource Programs* have included self-image building activities as a part of their parent education programs. The early work of Gordon (1975, 1977) is now coming to fruition in the form of *Family Resource Centers* where the personal needs of parents are receiving major attention. A distinct feature of the services and activities offered by these programs is their emphasis on involving parents in relationship-building experiences that prevent the emergence of family risks.

Of particular importance to schools and communities is the prevention or resolution of parent and family risks that are likely to impede the healthy functioning of children and families. Many of these risks are rooted in the personal functioning of parents. Parental impotency, often caused by past or present experiences with abuse, should be the focus of efforts to resolve many family risk situations (Fontana, 1992). Powell's review (1990) of home visiting programs includes insights on the positive influence of programs (for example—The Western Carolina Center's Family, Infant, and Preschool Program) on multiproblem families. The impact on parental self-image is achieved through intense participation in making decisions that strengthen their personal efficacy. Weiss & Jacobs (1988) also point to the comprehensive nature of programs that aim to address the risk factors that clearly impede the well being of parents and children. Six risk factors that are especially damaging to young families: chemical abuse, antisocial parenting skills, malnutrition, poor health care, family abuse, and ineffective home learning environments (Swick, 1991). These barriers to family development are interrelated with other factors such as poverty and psychosocial maladies. When these factors are not addressed early in the parent/family development process they can stimulate an intergenerational cycle of at risk family behaviors (Fontana, 1992).

Parent education and family support have a distinct mission in responding to the needs of parents and children in at risk situations. The focus should be on: helping parents and families gain control over the forces that are eroding their power; engaging parents in experiences where they can gain a sense of self-worth and self-direction; and nurturing in parents the proactive beliefs essential to being positive family leaders (Swick, 1991). This focus has been carried out successfully in various ways. Home visit programs (utilizing trained professionals and paraprofessionals) have used family supports, counseling, and educational activities to position parents to gain the needed strength to resolve negative stressors. Quality early childhood programs have utilized collaborative designs to engage parents and children in play therapy, family networking, and related interventions to address particularly damaging risk factors. Some of the common threads in these intervention efforts are: helping parents acquire the "basics" for family well being; supporting parents in their efforts to acquire needed job skills and educational resources; involving parents in services that help them resolve specific risk factors; and assisting parents in gaining an understanding of their development as persons and parents (Powell, 1989).

The initial focus of parent education should be on early parenting behaviors, those behaviors and attributes that lead to nurturing and loving relationships. The emphasis should focus, for example, on the critical roles of nurturing, teaching, and modeling—and on parents' involvement in acquiring an understanding of themselves as worthy and capable individuals who can enter into healthy marital, friendship, and family relationships.

Focus on Marital/Friendship Relationships

Regardless of the parent's marital status, the need for strong and nurturing adult relationships is essential to family wellness. In presenting this need as a part of parent education the discussion of "marital relationships" is inclusive of single-parents' relationships with intimate adult friends. In effect, *the orientation is on the psychological and social relationships of the adult partners who sustain the family's healthy development and functioning.* The marital or friendship "team," although sadly neglected in the parent education literature, is the source of most family strengths and stressors.

The adult partners who "become parents" need educational and social insights into the process, as it is clearly a major influence on all aspects of parenting and family life. They need to gain a perspective on the dynamics of their marriage or friendship and on how these dynamics come to influence and be influenced by the "ecology of family life" (Galinsky, 1987). This process begins with each parent understanding their "self" as a person, as a marital partner, and as an emerging parent. Parent education and family support can influence this process by first recognizing it as integral to parenting and then by offering resources that assist parents in addressing it.

The work of Cowan & Cowan (1992, p. 5) identifies *five dimensions of "when partners become parents" that have a dramatic influence on the emerging quality of family life:*

- The inner life of both parents and the first child, with special emphasis on each one's sense of self, view of the world, and emotional well being or distress;

- The quality of the relationship between the husband and wife, with special emphasis on their family roles and patterns of communication;

- The quality of the relationships among the grandparents, parents, and grandchildren;

- The relationships between the nuclear family members and key individuals or institutions outside the family (work, friends, child care), with special emphasis on the stress and support that these people and institutions provide;

- The quality of the relationships between each parent and their first child.

Four elements emerge from these dimensions as integral to parent education during the family's early development: relationships, the dyadic nature of the marriage, intra-family system patterns, and family-environment interface. Central to the emergence of the family as a healthy system of human relationships is the marital/friendship and personal dynamics of the parents. Their partnership sets the stage for their becoming parents. As Galinsky (1987) notes, each parent forms an identity and reframes this identity as this partnership evolves from their interactions.

What can parent education accomplish with parents and how can it address the needs of parents at this point in their development? Cowan & Cowan (1992, p. 9) describe one approach which they call *Couples Groups.*

> The *couples groups* provided an experience that we (the authors) wish we could have had as we became parents fifteen years earlier. In the last few months of pregnancy, the group leaders helped couples take a look at their current lives, anticipate what their lives

would be like once the baby arrived, and make explicit some of their unexplored pictures of life as a family.

These "guided yet personal group sessions" supported parents in making the transition to parenthood. Unlike short and delimited parenting programs, these sessions continued through the third year of the first child's life. Cowan & Cowan (1992, p. 11) summarize some of their observations on the stressors and challenges parents face during this transition.

- Our impression was that there was a strong similarity between how parents handled the dilemmas of the early months of becoming a family and how they responded to their children as toddlers.
- We noticed that parents who talked about having very conflicted relationships with their own parents described more conflicted relationships with their children.
- Parents who fought more as a couple said that they were having more difficulty in handling their children. By contrast, parents who got along well with each other tended to describe their relationships with their children in more positive terms.
- The real news is that the *relationship between the parents* seems to act as a crucible in which their relationships with their children take shape.

The Cowans' work (1992) showed that carefully designed educational intervention can help parents examine these influences in their lives as they make the transition to parenthood. Their work is particularly instructive regarding the significance of the marital relationship. They point to the following as **indicators of risk** in this regard.

- Major distress before the baby is born in any of the arenas of family life.
- Serious ambivalence in one or both spouses regarding the pregnancy.
- Low self-image and major depression or disappointment in one or both of the parents.
- Negative views of each other as spouses.
- Serious discontent with arrangements for the care of the child.
- Chronic "strain" and "stress" within the marriage.
- Consistent poor communication within the marital or family relationship.

The Cowans' found that the presence of these risk factors had a distinctly negative influence on all aspects of the family's development. In response to the need for "parent education and support" for parents at this critical transition stage, they designed support groups with the focus on the following areas:

- Share and develop expectations about parenting and family life as a couple.
- Carry out regular feedback or "checkups" as a couple on how you feel about your parenting—individually and as partners.
- Set aside "time to talk" with each other as a couple at least once a week.
- Develop a "parenting/family" agenda together so that problems and concerns are discussed openly and addressed as a team.
- Develop a flexible, experimental approach to parenting—develop a style that is nurturing of the changes that come so quickly during infancy and toddlerhood.
- Nurture the marriage relationship and avoid the "loss of intimacy" syndrome that erodes the very foundation for having healthy family life.
- Line up and utilize support persons who you as a couple feel can help your family grow in positive ways.
- Locate or develop a small but supportive network with friends who can discuss the issues of early parenting with you.
- Seek a balance among the many dimensions of being a person, spouse, parent, and contributor to the community.

Ellen Galinsky (1987) provides a "developmental framework" that parent educators and teachers can use in supporting parents in their early experiences with becoming a parent.

In Galinsky's (1987) "Stages of Parenthood," the *Image-Making Stage* is the foundation upon which all the other stages are developed. It is the "visioning stage" of parenting where parents create a map of what they would like to be as a parent and how they hope to carry out this image. Through actual parenting experiences, they gradually and continually revise this image, although it does appear to serve as a lifelong reference point for parents. The *Nurturing Stage* is where parents make their unconditional commitment to the child, a unifying and energizing attachment; it is this "bonding" that makes healthy family life possible. This is not a static or mechanical process but rather a spiritual process where parents struggle to define their selves in relationship to the infant, seeing in themselves the nurturer as lover and guide for the child and for themselves as they pursue this challenging and rewarding journey of parenting.

As parents and children grow, the *Authority Stage* emerges so that each person (parent and child) has some defined space, time, and resources in which they can grow individually and yet function harmoniously within the family's evolving relationships. It is in this stage that parents refine their image in the sense that they begin to see the child as a separate growing person, see themselves as growing adults, and yet also see the need for continued family unity in order to nurture this process.

As children approach the school years, parents once again refine their parenting to focus on the *Interpretive Stage*. In this role, parents become true guides, helping their children make sense of the world around them and their place in it. The major emphasis in this stage is on helping children become moral persons within a loving and caring framework. During adolescence and young adulthood, parents and children experience the *Interdependence Stage* where more mutually responsive relationships take shape. Ultimately, the *Departure Stage* signals a transition and transformation of roles, where adult-parents and adult-children begin the process of forming an intergenerational bond—thus enabling a new generation to shape a new agenda. The "Stages of Parenthood" description that follows offer examples of the major challenges of each stage. It is a useful study tool within parent-professional discussion groups as well as an excellent resource for sharing with parents individually. See Ellen Galinsky (1987) for more detailed materials on this concept.

Stages of Parenthood

Stage	Descriptor
Image-Making	The major task of this stage is preparing for parenthood. This includes preparing for a changing sense of self and changing relationships with one's partner and one's own parents. Parents-to-be begin to get attached to the unborn baby, begin to understand that the baby will be a separate person, and they ready themselves for the actual birth.
Nurturing	The major task of this stage is to form an attachment to the baby. This encompasses the task of reconciling the imagined child with the child that is born. Accepting their new role, parents have to enlarge their relationships with each other, their other children, and their own parents to include the baby, to redefine these relationships, and then to try to right the imbalance created by the birth, particularly to their sense of self.
Authority	The parent has the major task of accepting this new dimension of responsibility, accepting his or her authority over the child. This entails determining the scope of authority, communicating, then enforcing what has been established. In the process, parents begin to feel more separate from their child, begin to understand that the child is not really an extension of them.
Interpretive	Their major task is to interpret the world to their children, and that entails not only interpreting themselves to their children and interpreting and developing their children's self concepts, but also answering their questions, providing them access to the skills and information they need, and helping them form values. As such, parents also continue to define the separateness/connectedness of their relationships and to figure out how involved they want to be in their children's lives.
Interdependent	In brief, parents now have the task of developing a new, more mutual relationship with their almost adult.
Departure	Parents major task is preparing for the departure of the now adult child.

Throughout all of the stages, the marital/friendship relationship permeates the dynamics of family life. The *images* formed during the *Image-Making Stage* are the most powerful because they define the parameters that will echo through all other events and experiences. Couples, as Fishel (1991) and Galinsky (1987) note, are in a process of shaping a new image of themselves as individuals, as a couple (dyad), and as a soon-to-be family (triad). This process involves them in refining their personal self-image in relationship to being a part of a growing family. It is also a time of refining the "couple relationship" to accommodate this new system of relationships, which necessarily involves them in imagining how they will now relate to their parents, the work place, their friends, and to others. All of this imaging is centered around their becoming parents.

> **The content of parent education in this regard should focus on the transformation process** that new parents are experiencing. Peer group sharing, parent study teams, insights from successful parent role models, informal reading, and corresponding parent/family support group activities are strategies suggested (Cowan & Cowan, 1992; Fishel, 1991; Galinsky, 1987).

Galinsky (1987, pp. 319-320) used biographical questions to stimulate parental thinking about these transformation issues.

- When you have time to think, when you listen to that voice that is always going in your head, what is it saying about being a parent?
- How has having children affected your relationships with your _________ (wife, ex-wife, girlfriend/husband, ex-husband, boyfriend)?
- How has having children affected your relationship with your parents?
- Do you remember yourself as a child of your children's age? What were you like? How does this memory affect you?
- How has having children affected your work and the rest of your life? For the complete list of biographical questions see Galinsky (1987, pp. 319-320).

Fishel (1991, pp. 268-271) used a questionnaire on *Family Relationships Across The Generations* to engage parents in exploring the nuances of the "Becoming A Parent" process with particular emphasis on the marital relationship. The following are sample items from the questionnaire she used.

- What about parenting do you enjoy the most and the least?

- In what ways do your children remind you of yourself, their other parent, or other members of your family of origin or your partner's family of origin? How does this influence your relationship with your children?

- Describe one or two parenting issues on which you and your partner disagree that grow out of differences in your families of origin?

- Compare the way your partner combines working and parenthood with the way his/her parents combined them.

The focus of this aspect of parent education (Strong Marital/Friendship Relationships) is clearly on supporting new parents in creating positive partnerships and on assisting experienced parents in resolving issues that may be impeding their functioning.

Focus on Meaningful Relationships with Children

As parents become secure in their personal and marital contexts, their interests expand (in an interactive manner) to learning more about their roles with children. With the sense of self-confidence that is gained through their personal growth, the development of knowledge, skills, and attitudes for nurturing their children becomes a priority. As a part of this desire to learn about various child development skills, parents want and should be a part of the team that plans parent education experiences (Comer & Haynes, 1991).

Parents' involvement in shaping their parent education experiences is imperative to the formation of a partnership with their helpers, one that is truly a mutually beneficial arrangement. Recent parent education programs have used various means to gain parent input in program activities. Powell (1988) and Pence (1988) observe that the move toward a meaningful parent-professional relationship includes the observance of the integrity of both; neither sees the other as simply a client or as a professional but rather as concerned and capable partners with much to contribute to each other and their children.

One example of this proactive approach is the *Family Literacy Project* (Darling, 1989). While the focus of this program is on at risk parents and children, the strategies used are easily adapted for use with all parents. The project provides early intervention in an attempt to break the cycle of illiteracy by combining efforts to offer early childhood education along with strategies to improve the literacy and parenting skills of undereducated parents. The program includes components on: early childhood education; parenting education; adult education; and vocational training. One unique feature of the parenting education aspect of the program is that it actively engages parents in experiences where they are both supporting their children in positive ways and doing learning activities with them and skilled caregivers.

Another promising effort is the *Parents As Teachers (PAT)* project (White, 1988). This project attempts to meet the need parents express related to how children develop and learn during the early childhood years. Initially, the program's concepts were developed through extensive study by Dr. Burton L. White and then field-tested in selected communities in Missouri. The basic purpose of the project is to educate first-time parents about children's development during the first three years of life. An inviting feature of this effort is that it is designed for the common needs of all parents as they begin the parenting journey. Services include information and guidance to parents prior to the birth of the baby; information about what parents should attend to in terms of the child's social, language, and cognitive development; periodic health assessments for the child; a parent resource center; monthly home visits; and monthly group meetings (White, 1988).

Initially, parents seek information and support about their evolving relationship with the child (LaRossa, 1986). This interest centers on the development of close emotional bonds with the child. Most parent education programs that address this need focus on concrete ways of engaging parents in nurturing roles with their infants. White (1988) identifies *attachment and nurturance* as the primary processes for parents to carry out during this initial phase of parenting. As Cataldo (1987, p. 202) indicates, parents carry out this process in many natural ways:

> To ensure the child's emotional security, love can be associated with physical care and emotional nurturance; that is, parents and teachers can convey many positive feelings toward children throughout the course of a typical day. During the infant years, parents may stare at, stroke, kiss, smile, and sing to their children during feeding, diapering, playing, and putting them to sleep.

The many other dimensions of love and attachment emerge in more elaborate ways as children and parents develop more mutually responsive relationships.

The focus on *social competence* between parent and child is the natural extension of their journey to "build family" in the sense that their communal competence must be established through love before authority, autonomy, and identity can take shape in meaningful ways (Honig, 1989).

An excellent example of the "focus on the child" through parent education is the *Syracuse University Family Development Research Program* (Lally, Mangione, & Honig, 1988). A major feature of this program was assisting parents in acquiring and refining infant nurturance skills. The goals of the program provide a quality framework for all parent programs hoping to meet parental needs at this point in the family's development (Lally, Mangione, & Honig, 1988, p. 82):

> The goals of the parent outreach component were to support a rich quality of family interactions and increase family cohesiveness. Home visitors encouraged an intense mother-child relationship that involved affectionate bodily loving contacts, yielding to children's needs for self-comforting activities, and responding positively to a young child's efforts or productions to learn.

Another example of this focus on supporting parental competence in developing healthy and supportive relationships with infants is the *Prenatal/Early Infancy Project*. The program attempted to reach first-time mothers during pregnancy with a diversity of services that might prevent risk factors from emerging and destroying the foundation of the family's wellness. Focusing on the comprehensive and interrelated needs of mothers and children, Olds (1988, p. 240) says:

> The aim of the program was to prevent a wide range of childhood health and developmental problems by improving the life-course development, social resources, health habits, and caregiving skills of the children's parents.

During pregnancy the program emphasized nutrition, family adjustment, and preparation for the beginning of family life. Once the baby arrived, the focus shifted to helping parents develop sensitive and growth-promoting relationships with their children and to helping parents create a secure foundation for long-term family wellness.

These and other projects reflect the proper emphasis on supporting parent-child and family relationship building during this time when families begin their journey.

Focus on the Preschool Years

As children and parents grow, the perceived-needs of parents are centered on the forces that promote or impede the child's development and learning. While parental interest in these forces varies according to parent variables such as attitudes, interest in education, and availability of basic resources—most parents want help in negotiating the map of the preschool years. This "map" includes many different choices related to the child's physical, social, intellectual, and spiritual development as well as many parent/family management issues. Two thematic areas serve as a way of organizing parent education and family support during the preschool period: child needs and parent/family needs.

Child Needs: The concerns of parents as reflected in parent education content include: child development knowledge, information on behavior and relationships, knowledge and support related to health and nutrition, ideas and resources for promoting children's learning (particularly social and language development), and information and support on special topics as related to the unique needs of children (Cataldo, 1987; Swick, 1984).

Throughout history parents have had a natural interest in *learning about children's development*. Today's cultural folklore provides plenty of resources to feed this need. Unfortunately, the quality of information available does not match the quantity. Professionals can assist parents by organizing and selecting information that has been supported by research and meaningful practice.

Basic child development information programs are sponsored by many groups and typically include information on the child's physical, social, emotional, language, intellectual, and spiritual development as it takes place within supportive environments during the years birth—five years of age. *Minnesota's Early Learning and Development program (MELD)* places a priority on meeting this need. Within community-based programs every effort is made to help parents understand the total developmental process in children and to understand how this process influences their parenting. Through group meetings, child care, and individual assistance, this developmental journey is made real and is related to the specific concerns of each parent (Engstrom, 1988).

Parent-child relationships and behavior is a prevalent topic in preschool parenting programs. Cataldo (1987) provides a system for organizing this aspect of parent education which includes the following elements: communication, social skills, handling distress and conflict, behavior and development, behavior and circumstances, and the manner in which these elements are dealt with within family and family-environment interactions. As Cataldo points out, parents are most interested in acquiring information and skills in the following areas:

- Communication behaviors of children that are appropriate for their development and how these behaviors can be nurtured.

- Parent-child communication behaviors that foster warm, positive, and happy family relationships.

- Child social skills and behaviors as appropriate for their development and ways to encourage and teach these skills.

- Social skill-areas such as peer relationships, appropriate play behaviors, child care and school adjustment, self-confidence, and self-care skills.

- Distress and conflict strategies and understandings that can promote children's self-confidence and sustain parent and family harmony.

- Information and direct experiences with appropriate behavior and development indicators that should emerge in children and in parent-child and family relationships.

- Insights on why children's behavior varies with contexts and ideas on how to best respond to these situations.

Discipline is perhaps the most popular parent request during the early years. Sadly, many parents and professionals still associate this term with punitive meaning. In fact, as Cataldo (1987, p. 180) notes, "discipline has more to do with teaching and guidance than with punishment." She provides an excellent perspective on this construct (Cataldo, 1987, p. 180):

> Discipline is purposeful. It is not simply a punishment for wrongdoing or a way of making children behave in the way that adults insist is correct. . . . Broadly defined it is an important process whereby children learn approved ways of dealing with feelings, of interacting with others, and of gaining internal, self-directed standards of right and wrong.

She supports this perspective with an outline of positive strategies parent educators can use in supporting parents: focus on praising positive behavior, offer consistent but flexible guidelines for achieving desired behavior, help children learn to express their feelings, and be sensitive to the peaks and valleys of normal behavioral development.

There are various "behavior and discipline" programs available. *Parent Effectiveness Training (PET)*, for example, relies heavily on the use of interpersonal communication in resolving problems between parent and child. Active listening is the primary strategy used in this approach. For young children, parents are helped to tune in to behaviors that express their needs and are advised to provide supports that enable children to deal with some needs without help. Cataldo (1987, p. 192) summarizes the positive aspects of this program:

> *PET* is relevant to the early childhood years in several ways. It can help parents to reveal and to attend to children's needs, to focus on a positive relationship, to build children's independence, and to teach children social skills they can use with others.

Active Parenting is another program that focuses on discipline. It is based on the "logical consequences" theory and focuses on a problem solving approach. This is an excellent program but parents and professionals need to "adapt" it to the realities of young children who have not yet developed cause-effect thinking patterns to the level of adults (Berger, 1991).

Literally thousands of school sponsored parent education programs on "Discipline" are offered annually. In *Parents and Teachers as Shapers of Discipline*, Swick (1985, pp. 16-18) emphasizes the themes that need close attention: the significance of close parent-child attachment, information on child behavior and development, basic child care skills strategies, dealing with behavior problems in positive ways that promote self-care skills, promoting prosocial behavior in children, and parent-child relationships. One strategy approach offered to parents is called the "Three C's of Discipline":

> This approach introduces parents to the three C's of effective discipline: Consistency, Cooperation, and Competence. It uses specific situations to stress the importance of these basics of discipline. For example, the program stresses parental consistency in reinforcing children's positive behavior, helping them develop a cooperative attitude toward others, as well as helping children gain competence in group skills.

Children's Health and Development are natural parent education themes during the early childhood years. This content area needs to be interrelated with specific health services for children and parents. For example, the prenatal care of mothers should be a priority and comprehensive health education should be a part of it. Content that parents-to-be need to acquire at this point focuses both on their health during and after pregnancy as well as in the health of the baby. The "preventive" health focus on being drug-free, avoiding hazards that endanger the fetus, and preparing a safe and healthy environment are essential. Early childhood programs need to pursue the "National Health Goals" of reducing infant mortality, reducing low birth weight, and increasing maternal prenatal care (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 1992). This can be accomplished only as necessary services and education are made available to every parent. Parents must be alerted to the "risk factors" that place them and their baby in danger:

- Cigarette smoking
- Drug use
- Poor nutrition
- Chronic mental health problems
- Environmental hazards

Most preschool parent/family oriented health education programs focus on prevention, safety, nutrition, positive social and emotional climate, and the development of good health habits. Berger (1991, pp. 239-240) describes a collaborative community effort in this regard.

> In Baltimore, the Sinai Hospital Department of Pediatrics, under the leadership of Dr. Barbara Howard, developed a program to meet the needs of high-risk children. Funding was obtained through lead control and nutrition programs and Head Start. The effort aims to help through (1) a preschool program for at-risk children; (2) nutritional meals; (3) a parent program that focuses nutrition, meal preparation, and child development advice offered by the University of Maryland Cooperative Extension Services; and (4) parent participation in preschool.

Already the program has produced results: reductions in blood-lead levels in the children, more knowledgeable parents, and less isolated parents. Additional important content for program leaders to address include: home safety, immunizations, regular health checkups, positive mental health, and related health issues (Cataldo, 1987).

Promoting children's learning has always been a special interest of parents. Unfortunately, the stress to "ready" children for school has promoted distorted ideas about the proper role of children's learning during the preschool years (Swick, 1991). A basic framework for parent education that helps parents promote children's learning is presented by Hamner & Turner (1991, Chapter 2).

Parenting for Promoting Children's Learning: Important Themes

Stage of Development	Theme
Infancy	Attachment, Trust-Building, Safe-Secure Environment, Natural Stimulation (Physical, Social, Perceptual, Cognitive), Parent-Infant Play.
Toddlerhood	Child-Proof Safety, Promoting Autonomy,Self-Help Skills, Social and Intellectual Learning, Language Stimulation, Encouraging Curiosity.
Preschoolers	Nurturing The Growing Child, Using Appropriate Play Materials, Parent Involvement In Child's Learning, Family-School Linkages.

In particular, child development and early childhood educators advocate the following as roles for parents to emphasize in their design and actions related to family learning during the preschool years (Cataldo, 1987).

- Emotional and social responsiveness
- Proactive family interaction
- Nurturance of child interests
- Positive involvement in child's play
- Provisions for stimulating but balanced environment
- Modeling of language, social, and cognitive learning
- Observation and appropriate feedback to developmental changes
- Promoting positive self-image

The special needs and unique situations of children are also important parts of parent education. The diversity of such needs has increased dramatically as our society has become more complex. Thus, many early childhood programs have created parenting programs for specific populations who have a common need. These include—as examples—parents with children who have Aids, children with learning problems, children who have particular handicapping conditions, and a plethora of other unique situations.

Hamner & Turner (1991) provide two thematic frameworks for organizing *special needs topics* in parent education: "Parenting in High-Risk Families" and "Parenting an Exceptional Child."

Parenting in High-Risk Families

- Risks Facing Adolescent Parents
- Abusive Parents And Programs That Help
- Other High-Risk Parenting Situations

Parenting an Exceptional Child

- The Physically Handicapped
- The Mentally Handicapped
- The Learning Disabled
- The Sensory Impaired
- The Gifted and Talented
- The Behaviorally Disordered
- Strategies & Resources

Selecting child care for the preschool child has become one of the most essential topics in parent education programs. The shortage of "quality" child care settings makes this topic even more significant. A majority of parents of preschool children now work out of the home and must rely on others to care for their children during the day. While White (1988) does not recommend group care for infants and toddlers, the realities are that most parents do not have a choice within the current social and work context. The three major challenges confronting parents on this issue are: making a choice regarding out-of-home care that they feel secure and happy with; finding "care" that is high quality, affordable, and accessible; and developing a family-child care relationship that is beneficial to them and their children.

Unfortunately, most programs do not help parents with these decisions, or the treatment given to them is of minimal value. Powell (1989) notes that when parents are given support in making day care decisions the result is positive. The National Association for the Education of Young Children's *Guide To Accreditation* (1989) and position statements by NAEYC and by the Southern Association for Early Childhood Education (1987) provide excellent criteria for use with parents in exploring their decisions related to preschool care.

Magid & McKelvey (1987) provide one of the most useful set of guidelines for parents and professionals regarding "What to Look For" in selecting a quality child care arrangement. What follows is a synthesis of their work, see their full outline for more details (Magid & McKelvey, 1987, pp. 286-290).

Quality Child Care: What To Look For

Caregiver

- There should be no more than 1 to 3 infants or small children per adult caregiver.
- One caregiver has the responsibility for your infant in particular. This is most important if your child is under 18 months old.
- At least one person should be a fully certified early childhood professional and all staff should have at least some formal child development training.
- The staff should work well together and there should be continuity of staff from year to year.
- Staff should be nurturing and loving and warmly interact with the children.
- Staff should praise, encourage and support children as they develop self-help skills.
- Staff talk to and interact in positive ways with the children and parents regularly.

Facilities

- The surroundings should be safe and clean with plenty of room for the infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.
- Specific, appropriate areas are set aside for nap and quiet times.
- A fenced yard with plenty of space for play, running, jumping, and other physical activities exists.
- The environment is safe and well maintained.
- Nutritious food is served in a family style setting.
- Safe action toys are plentiful for the children.

Program

- Active, creative, and child-appropriate learning activities are prevalent.
- The program is flexible within a well organized daily plan that emphasizes the deeply personal needs of each child.
- Children are exposed to "outside" interest areas such as zoos, parks, community places and other enjoyable visits.
- Parents are involved regularly and in a diversity of ways.

The *transition to the formal school years* calls for parenting information and experiences that support them and their children in making the adjustment to a more formalized schedule in a positive and personal way. Swick (1991, 1992) reviews five areas that parents usually seek assistance with:

- What are the major things I need to know about the school in order to help my child adjust?
- What is the curriculum and program of the school like?
- What do I need to do to help my child be ready for school?
- Who, what, when, where, and how is the teaching/learning process carried out?
- How can I help my child as he or she becomes involved in the school?

Parent Needs: As the family develops during the preschool years, parents confront new challenges that parent education and family support programs need to be responsive to. These challenges can be "clustered" around the themes of: establishing a "parenting identity" that is positive and supportive; creating a "family system" that is stable and yet flexible; and developing workable family-environment relationships (Galinsky, 1987; Powell, 1989; Swick, 1987). One way of articulating these needs and appropriate parent education responses is through reviewing what other programs have found to be helpful. Another way is through a review of the literature. And, of course, case examples help to highlight some of the important aspects of this process. All of these sources are used to explore this aspect of parent education.

Establishing a parenting identity is a continuing process during the preschool years. It involves parents in recognizing roles that are integral to their caring for children within a proactive view of themselves. Parent education at this point of parental development provides three major resources: information, opportunities for sharing, and a setting in which parents can acquire validation on their evolving competence (Galinsky, 1987; Swick, 1988). The "parent identity" theme, as supported by various education and support activities, includes *six key skill areas:* providing physical care and protection, modeling a healthy family life, parental management of behavior, sensitive attention to emotional and social needs, management of activities and education, and family use of community resources and schools (Cataldo, 1987). Typically, these skill-areas serve as themes for workshops, home visit activities, discussion groups, reading materials, family learning suggestions, specific resources, and other supports.

Creating a stable and yet flexible family system is another ongoing need that all parents deal with during the preschool years (Swick, 1987). New needs and new perspectives emerge with becoming a family. Parents confront new schedules, changes in relationships in all dimensions, begin to think more like adults, and are beginning to sense that the community now has new expectations for them. By necessity parents look for new skills and ways to shape and manage this "family system." Perhaps the biggest need of parents is finding sources of ideas (and examples) on how to achieve harmony within this rapidly growing arrangement. Powell (1989) found that informal exchanges among parents met a major need in this regard. These informal gatherings provided parents with resources relevant to helping them solidify their part in parenting.

Achieving family stability is particularly challenging in situations where abuse and other dysfunctions have preceded the family's beginning (Fontana, 1992). The combination of past history of abuse and current chronic stress are potentially explosive factors. Parents whose history includes past abuse, extreme emotional stress, and a combination of other known risk factors such as illiteracy, drug dependency, poor health, and prolonged unemployment are *high-risk* for continuing a cycle of dysfunction (Fontana, 1992). Preventive and early parent education can play a major role in helping high risk families establish an effective family system. Practices focus on helping parents gain positive control of themselves and nurturing strategies for managing the family. Intensive support services are used to address specific parent and family needs (Berger, 1991).

Creating a workable family-environment relationship is the most difficult challenge most parents experience during this period. The complexity of "building family" within a social context where resources are minimal and of limited access is stressful. The fact is that many parents become so overwhelmed with the tasks of creating a workable "match" between family and environment that basic child and parents needs are neglected (Swick, 1985). This need is evident in Powell's findings on parent discussion groups. He notes the prevalence of concern among parents about environmental and relationship issues (Powell, 1989, p. 95):

> What replaced the decreasing discussion of parent-child topics? Conversations about the larger social environment—extended family, marital relations, careers, jobs, neighborhoods, crime, community services, housing, and the like—increased in both the formal and informal settings.

One powerful support effort that has explored the process of meeting this need is *The Family Matters Program*. The primary mission was to promote in parents of preschool children skills and attitudes that might empower them in developing improved family-environment relationships (Cochran, 1988). A significant point in this effort is that by helping families "maintain" strength through meaningful connections with the environment, they are less likely to become overwhelmed. Networking, finding outlets for existing skills, and negotiating the nuances of family changes—particularly as they related to the workplace, child care and neighborhood resources—are the major issues articulated by parents.

The *Family Systems Model* approach (Dunst & Trivette, 1988) also emphasizes the family-environment match concept. This approach is particularly interested in helping parents activate their "informal social support system" to create a continuing source of strength for the family.

Parent education programs that attempt to help parents strengthen their support system come in various forms: resource centers, parent education discussion groups, mentoring projects, parent networking, and intergenerational teaming (Cochran, 1988). Ultimately, the goal is to help parents develop a "match" with the environment that is workable for their family.

Parent Education Programs and Practices

The move to provide parents and families with more supportive environments has stimulated the development of various parent education programs. Three current program examples and several relevant practices are presented as possible ways to pursue the family strengthening process. The programs and practices presented represent some of the major emphases present in most family oriented efforts in early childhood education.

Parents As Teachers: One of the most prominent parent education programs in recent efforts, the PAT program emerged from the research and development work of Dr. Butron L. White (1988). The program provides parent education beginning in the third trimester of pregnancy until the child's third birthday. (In some of Missouri's new projects the effort has been enlarged to include prenatal care and follow-up services beyond the third year of life.) *Services provided* include help for preparing the parent to be a parent during pregnancy, child development information and developmental screenings. Services are provided through home visits, group meetings, newsletters, parent centers, and referrals. The goals include providing parents with knowledge of child development, helping parents to gain confidence in their child-rearing practices, enhancing the cognitive, language and social development of participating children, providing parents with information to detect and reduce incidences of handicapping conditions in their children (particularly vision and hearing), and helping parents develop positive connections with the program, school, and community.

Program content is based upon Dr. Burton White's seven phases of early childhood development. These phases of development are thoroughly explained in White's book (1988) *Educating The Infant and Toddler*. White also maintains a "Center for Parent Education" where resources, training, and support are provided. The substance of the program is based on four areas of child development that White has documented as the core of children's growth during the first three years of life: language, social, cognitive, and general curiosity.

With feedback from participating communities, the program has initiated efforts to meet particular needs of at risk populations such as teen parents.

Yet the basic mission of serving all new parents with educational and support resources remains as the primary function. *Research findings of PAT* provide a perspective on its evolving direction and achievements (Missouri Department of Education, 1985):

- Parents are more knowledgeable about child-rearing practices and child development than parents not involved in the program.
- Risk factors in children were reduced by age 3 as compared to children of parents not involved in the program.
- Staff were effective in identifying developmental risks and in addressing them through interagency strategies.
- Parents are more positive toward school and community involvement than parents not involved in the program.
- Children are more advanced than other children in their language, problem solving, and social skills.

Minnesota's Early Childhood Family Education Program: *Minnesota's Early Learning Design (MELD)* is one of the classic parent education and family support programs, having started in 1973 and continued through to the present. Elwood (1988, p. 303) briefly reviews its impact:

> It has evolved over the past 14 years into a family support program implemented in 83 locations, 19 states, and 3 foreign countries. The program has gained a reputation—nationally and internationally—for its curriculum, its structure, and its process. The program name has come to connote a "melding" of the program's two primary components: information and support.

One of the most striking characteristics of the program is its outreach to parents of different contexts and needs. *The program aims to help parents* establish support networks involving not only other parents, but also various community resources, and to provide them with timely, accurate, age-specific, and unbiased child-rearing information.

The structure of the program is very reflective of the parent participation philosophy. Parents learn with and from each other in peer/self-help groups. The groups are facilitated by experienced parents who have been trained but who also are seen as "peers" by the other parents. Groups last 2 years—beginning during pregnancy and continuing through the child's second year.

Elwood (1988, p. 304) describes the overall *organizational system* of *MELD:*

> Group leaders and volunteers who are trained and supervised by a site coordinator, a part-time professional who receives training over a 1-year period. Each MELD site maintains an ongoing but autonomous relationship with MELD's central office, which provides technical assistance and new program materials. Local agencies provide administrative and financial support to MELD groups. ***The MELD curriculum*** addresses issues of child health, child development and guidance, parent development, and family management.

Parent goal setting, self-evaluation by local programs, and individualization of parent activities are clear strengths of the program. *Continuous evaluation of MELD* since its inception have indicated:

- Parents were consistent in attending and participating in group meetings.
- All of the mothers participating in the program received prenatal care.
- Almost half of the participants in the group meetings have been men.
- 88 percent of the mothers participating did not smoke during pregnancy.
- All of the children of participating parents received well-baby checkups.
- 97 percent of the children of participating parents were free of serious accidents while in the program.
- Developmentally, children of participating families generally exceeded the criteria for their age as compared to other children.
- 89 percent of the children in the programs had updated immunizations.

These and other evaluative findings indicate that MELD is achieving significant parent, child, and family strengthening tasks. The program's design is comprehensive and flexible, thus allowing for easy adaptation by other communities.

The Kenan Trust Family Literacy Project: This parent-oriented early childhood program was initiated in the 1988-89 school year with funding from the William R. Kenan, Jr. Charitable Trust. Andrew Hayes (1989, p. 6), in an evaluation report on the project, describes the major mission:

The project was a bold attempt to improve education for "at risk" youngsters and their "at risk" parents by going beyond the confines of elementary, secondary, and adult-education classrooms. The project intervenes early to break the cycle of illiteracy and undereducation by combining efforts to provide quality early-childhood education with efforts to improve the literacy and parenting skills of undereducated adults.

Four components comprise the substance of the program. Each component is briefly reviewed as follows.

- *Parent Literacy Training:* This part of the program attempts to provide parents with individualized assistance on educational goals established by the parents. These experiences range from offering GED courses to training for specific job skills.

- *Parenting And Parent Education:* Two elements comprise this component, Parent Time (PT) and Parent And Children Time (PACT). PT Time is described as follows (Hayes, 1989, p. 10):

> During PT, the group consisting of parents, teachers, and resource persons design programs of interest to study and discuss. These sessions usually are scheduled in the early afternoon for a period of about 45 minutes of time. PT topics include, for example, child nurturing, managing and coping with child behavior, community resources, parent-child communication, spouse abuse, and job and educational opportunities.

PACT Time offers an opportunity for parents and children to get involved in joint activities that stimulate and reinforce interaction within the family. This process has two parts: one in which the teacher models working with children while parents observe; and one in which the parents work with their children as teachers in activities planned by the children.

- *Early Childhood Education:* Utilizing the High/Scope Curriculum, this part of the program involves the children in learning activities they plan and carry out. The curriculum focuses on the broad range of learning skills children develop during the preschool years. An active learning approach is supported by nurturing teachers who use a diversity of materials and resources.

- *Human-Resources Development:* On a regular basis parents study various job-seeking skills and are placed in simulated job settings to build their competence for becoming employed.

The program serves many different parent populations and focuses on breaking the intergenerational cycle of illiteracy. It is under continual study and refinement. The project is being implemented in several communities: urban, rural, and suburban. Hayes (1989) provides evaluation results on the project at this point in its development. Some of these findings are summarized as follows.

- Parents and children made gains in academic performance, self concept, social skills, and in increasing control over their lives.

- Children made significant gains in self concept, language, and problem solving skills.

- Family literacy habits in the home improved substantially.

- Parent-child interactions became more nurturing and positive.

- Parents who participated regularly made significant improvements in their academic performance, in their relationships with others, and in their view of themselves.

- Parents who fully committed to the program completed their adult education objectives with successful results.

Emerging Parent Education Practices: The changing needs of families, research findings of programs that have served parents and families, and the feedback from parents participating in various programs, have influenced new developments in parent education. Some new directions of program practices include: providing comprehensive services, engaging parents in intensive program activities, capitalizing more on parent talents and resources, adapting program systems to the specific needs of parent populations, utilizing delivery systems that best suit the needs of particular communities and parents, moving toward more equitable parent-professional relationships, relying more on "networks," peer self-help groups, and other informal support approaches, and relating programs to the cultural values of the families being served (Powell, 1989; Weiss & Jacobs, 1988). Interrelated with these directions is the belief that early prevention and intervention are essential to any long-term success in strengthening families.

Comprehensive family services is perhaps the most prominent direction in parent education. This direction is seen in various forms, but its basic intent is to "blend" educational and support services into a meaningful system of family empowerment (Weiss & Jacobs, 1988). While the original impetus for "Family Service Centers" and other comprehensive efforts was to address the needs of at risk families, this concept is now seen as a preventive and enrichment source for all families. Weiss & Jacobs (1988, p. xx) note:

> They provide services in each of the domains typically included within the concept of social support: They supply *information* (e.g., child health and development and parenting information), *emotional and appraisal support* (e.g., empathy, feedback, and reinforcement to adults in parenting roles and access to other parents) and *instrumental assistance* (e.g., transportation and referrals to other services).

This ecologically sound practice is carried out differently according to local needs, resources, and preferences, but the underlying theme of *comprehensive prevention and empowerment resources* is typically present. A practice that is evolving in many communities, where no single agency or group can afford to staff and fund such centers, is that of *interagency planning and advisory councils*. These councils provide another means of reaching toward the goal of having comprehensive family support services available to families (Powell, 1988).

The involvement of parents and families in intensive, continuing parent education services is another practice being used more often. In contrast to the once popular one-shot program efforts (or the short-term parent programs), today's programs are finding more success with intensive involvement with families, particularly when the families are confronting multiple risks (Boyer, 1991). Research has shown that short-term, single-shot efforts have some positive influence but are often lost in the mass of complexities that many families face after the program ends (Weiss & Jacobs, 1988). Longer term programs, which often involve a home visitor of some sort, and usually include the use of multiple services—aim to empower parents and children with a life-style set of skills, attitudes, and resources that will enable them to be productive throughout the life span (Dym, 1988).

The use of parents as resources for each other is perhaps the most encouraging development in the field of parent education. Cochran & Henderson (1990), in *The Family Matters* program, successfully deployed this practice by helping parents organize and use their "informal networks" (inclusive of other parents) as a major resource in strengthening their families. Powell (1989) also found "peer sharing" in parent discussion groups proved to be a strong practice. Parent mentoring (where parents guide other parents via informal supportive relationships), parent networks, and "parents as resource teachers" are some examples of how this practice has become a reality in literally thousands of programs across the nation. This practice is a part of a larger effort to create more *parent-directed parent education programs*. It is part of the belief that parents know better than anyone else what the key needs are and have the abilities to address them when they have a supportive system.

Program adaptation to the specific needs of a parent population has emerged as a promising practice. While programs want to offer a comprehensive set of services to families, they also want to address specific needs of parents that are evident in their communities. In addition, program leaders have become more sensitive to the cultural, demographic, and contextual factors present in different parent populations (Powell, 1989). Thus, within ecologically comprehensive programs is the emergence of specific-focused "micro-programs." For example, many "Family Service Centers" offer programs for single-parents, parents experiencing abuse, unemployed fathers seeking support, and many other populations in need (Swick, 1987). Even within programs where needs are clear, the diversification of delivery systems is evidence of this desire to create a better program-parent match.

Delivery system diversification has taken many forms. It is representative of the realization that today's parents not only function within many different systems, but that they also have various preferences as to how to function within these systems (Swick, 1991). Diversity of parent education approaches offers more opportunities to more parents and thus creates an inviting ecology for promoting parent participation. Common practices include: group meetings offered at different times, home visitation schedules "matched" to parent work and family schedules, use of media-based technology to expand the means for parents to access information, especially designed "parent training" programs, individualized conferences, informal networking (inclusive of parents and professionals), parent resource libraries, adult education courses, and essential support services that enable parents to take advantage of available services (Swick, 1992).

Equitable and reciprocal parent-professional relationships is a practice that is now accepted as essential to having a successful program. Parental involvement in leadership roles, parent goal setting, parent-professional contracts, and parent self-assessment practices are emerging strategies being used to implement this concept. Comer & Haynes (1991), Powell (1988, 1989), & Rich (1987) present convincing evidence that this move to create a more partnership-oriented focus improves the participation and outcome factors in programs.

Parent mentoring and parent-peer groups are practices promoted by programs that aim to empower families. Two things happen when parents join forces with each other: one, they acquire a new sense of being part of a "group" that is focused on children in positive ways, and two, they realize the potential talent that is present in themselves and others (Cochran & Henderson, 1990). There is another dimension to this networking and mentoring process, that of enabling parents who have common cultural and contextual situations to address those issues in ways not likely to be viewed by others (Powell, 1988).

Effective Program Delivery Systems: The basic delivery systems of parent education have existed for many years. It is the development and refinement (and adaptation) of these systems with regard to the changing needs of parents and families that has proven meaningful. In addition, the extension of some practices through the use of technologies and related modern services has increased the ways available to professionals for reaching parents. The discussion here is limited to home visiting, group meetings, parent discussion/study groups, individualized parent conferencing, and parental involvement in centers and classrooms. *The theme is that diversity of ways for parents to acquire parent education increases the strength of the program.*

Home visiting is one of the most popular delivery systems in parent education. It offers the conditions for promoting "family change" more than most other strategies, such as one-to-one contact, application of ideas and strategies within the parent's real life setting, and many opportunities for trust-building which is essential to any educational undertaking (Gordon, 1976; Powell, 1990). *The goal* in most home visiting efforts is to provide parents and children with direct access to the desired service. It hopes to engage the parent and the child in joint activities, with the home visitor as the coordinator, guide, supporter, and overall facilitator. Within today's program focus on empowering families, the home visit is often structured so that *parents become leaders* within the dynamics of the program and within the realities of their family (Powell, 1990). *The process* thus involves home visitors and parents in joint planning and working relationships that help to achieve the goals of the program. This is different from past efforts where parent and professional roles were more rigidly defined. The process today is more collaborative, shared, and more interrelated with other family strengthening services. *The content* of programs typically revolve around educational, support, and enrichment activities that promote family strengthening. In early childhood education, the focus is often on literacy, parent training, family management, and related processes (Cataldo, 1987; Powell, 1990).

The real strength of the home visit is that it brings the parent into contact with a hopefully sensitive and caring person from the community who has the best interests of the family as his or her guiding light. It engages parents and children in activities that foster a stronger parent-child and family relationship system. It also attempts to create a family-community relationship that is positive, functional, and empowering (Swick, 1992). Clear goals, trained staff, sensitive support personnel, meaningful linkages to other school and community groups, and continuing assessment are elements necessary for having effective home visit programs. An adaptation of the home visit process is the *parent network and parent mentor process* (Swick, 1992). In this process, as parents gain an understanding of home visiting they acquire needed training and—in turn—carry out home visits with other parents.

Group meetings provide an efficient but not always personal way of involving parents in educational activities. Cataldo (1987, p. 109) describes the *basic purposes* of the group meeting approach:

> Group meetings have been used for informational sessions, formal training meetings, workshops, discussions, and even group counseling that deals with specific issues common to many parents.

Providing parents with new information has historically been the most prominent use of this approach. *Large group meetings* provide an opportunity to reach many parents with information that is important to the total group. Unfortunately, this technique has been abused in many cases and thus lost its appeal to many parents. *Small group meetings* have proven more effective because they usually evolve from the specific interests of parents. They also are more open to creating informality and interaction among parents and professionals (Swick, 1984).

The process by which group meetings are organized and implemented has much to do with their success or failure. The professional or paraprofessional has a key role to play in organizing the framework so that *program content* is reflective of parent interests and that the means by which this content is shared is of a participative nature. Principles of adult education call for the use of a diversity of instructional strategies: demonstration, use of visual materials, discussion, application, and assessment (Swick, 1984). In commenting on the *content and process* elements of group meetings, Cataldo (1987, p. 113) notes:

> To the extent that this content deals with children's needs and family dynamics it will be relatively effective. Of course, care must be taken to avoid duplicating information or skills parents have already acquired and to avoid using concepts above or beneath parents' abilities to understand. A second method is the use of group members' suggestions, ideas, and concerns. Parents are often able to transmit skills and understanding to one another or to build on their peers' strengths and needs, when these are discussed in the group. Finally, group programs often provide an organized social support for parents in which they can function as peers to others who are experiencing the same parenting joys and difficulties.

More recently, parent-professional planning teams have emerged to plan group meetings together, thus strengthening the total process (Swick, 1984). Programs need to reflect this empowerment philosophy.

Parent discussion/study groups have evolved from the group meeting practice because of the personal nature they promote among parents (Powell, 1989). This practice differs from group meetings in that it is *directed by parents* in the sense that *purpose, content, and process* are delineated by parents (Swick, 1984). Professionals might establish the structure and provide the overall coordination but parents direct the intent, the process, and the dynamics by which group identity is shaped. *The purpose* of discussion/study groups is to promote in parents the learning and development process inherent in the parenting role (Galinsky, 1987). Thus, the focus is on what parents see as critical for inclusion in programs. This flexibility allows for change of topics as parent-perceived needs change. Further, it stimulates in parents basic leadership skills so essential to their development of internal locus of control skills.

The process and content of study groups is reflective of the high parent participation focus of this practice. Parents determine the topics and often carry out the organization of the meetings. Some programs have a trained professional to coordinate the overall process. In other cases, a professional initiates the structure, trains parents to handle this process, and then moves on to start another discussion/study group. *The content* of these group sessions is purposefully flexible, promoting in parents the willingness to shift their focus with the changing needs of their families (Powell, 1989). While the structure for this practice is indeed flexible, it calls for a highly skilled leader to properly organize and deploy it. Powell & Eisenstadt (1988) suggest that skilled paraprofessionals need special training to be able to handle the shifting nature of these groups.

A key part of the success of study/discussion groups is connected to parental feelings of comfort in creating an intimate environment where exchanges of ideas and feelings can take place productively. Powell (1989) suggests that the initial climate for discussion and sharing of parent perspectives and feelings is critical to having long-term discussion and sharing in the group. Unskilled group leaders might see "discussion time" (particularly informal social exchanges) as wasteful, not pertinent to the serious work of parent education. ***A guiding principle*** for parent educators using this practice is: What are the real concerns and interests of the participating parents?

Individual parent conferences have often served as a means of close communication between parents and professionals. Unfortunately, such conferences often fail to capitalize on the mutual learning that can occur between parents and professionals. *The purpose* of educational and support conferences is to create a framework where the parent-professional relationship can evolve in mutually beneficial ways. Indeed, some programs now refer to conferences as *personal visits* to indicate the personal nature of these exchanges (Cataldo, 1987).

The process of conferences or personal visits might begin with the professional establishing the agenda in order to initiate the effort; but the ultimate outcome should be where parent and professional plan the agenda jointly (Swick, 1984). *The content* of conferences is typically framed by the following needs: sharing of information, learning about new child care techniques, comparing parent and professional observations on child progress, exploring common concerns, and reinforcing each others' importance to children and the learning process (Swick, 1984).

The key to successful conferences or personal visits is the communication environment established to promote equitable, sensitive, and responsive relationships between parents and professionals. Lawler (1991) suggests that the following are essential to this environment: friendliness, supportiveness, openness, attentiveness, responsiveness, and a sense of mutuality.

Parental involvement in centers and classrooms is a powerful form of learning. *The primary purpose* of this practice is to engage parents in hands-on learning related to their children's development through positive and contributive experiences in the classroom. In well designed programs, parents and professionals discuss and plan this process together. *It is a process* where parents usually have had prior learning about some aspect of child development/learning and are now applying their knowledge to actually working with their child in the classroom. But much more happens in this process. Parents use planning, observation, and interaction skills as they learn new ways of relating to their children.

The content of this practice is interrelated with the other goals of the parent education effort. Usually, it involves parents in learning child care, child development, specific learning strategies, and particular child management strategies (Cataldo, 1987). The professional needs to plan the experience so that what happens in the classroom is connected to the parents' situation. Poorly planned in-classroom parent participation can be a disaster. Advance planning, discussion with the parent about the focus of classroom learning, instruction for parents on how to function in the classroom, and a supportive parent-professional relationship are essential (Swick, 1984).

Well designed programs offer many benefits to parents, professionals, and children. Cataldo (1987, pp. 117-118) reviews some of these benefits:

> Extra assistance and enrichment are provided (to the children and the teacher), which contribute to program quality. Parents acquire new information about classrooms, the teaching-learning process, the peer group, educational toys and materials, and child management. Children and families are helped as well. Parent-child relationships may improve with greater understanding of the child's out-of-home experiences and more opportunities to discuss these.

The Potential Benefits of Parent Education

The benefits of parent education and family support programs are potentially great. Weiss & Jacobs (1988) identify six categories of possible positive outcomes: child-focused, parent-child, parent, family system, family stress management, and social support. This categorization of possible parent education outcomes is in contrast to the more limited child and parent-focused research of fifty years ago. While this broader conceptualization of possible influences of parent education is encouraging, the research tools and methods are just now beginning to catch up with the theoretical designs. Yet, in spite of methodological limitations—there are research outcomes that suggest the possible accomplishments of well designed, high quality parent education and family support programs. The following brief review of these possible influences is suggestive of what might be accomplished, depending upon program goals and resources.

Child outcomes have always been a major focus of parent education. Historically, the early attention to increasing parent competence through parent education was viewed primarily as a means of positively influencing child outcomes such as behavior, adaptation to a new environment, school achievement, improved health, and many other variables (Osborn, 1991). The potential impact on children of high-quality parent and family education and support programs is highlighted by the following data from research (Powell, 1989; Weiss & Jacobs, 1988).

- Programs have been found to, at least in the short term, positively influence children's intellectual ability and overall school readiness.

- Programs have positively influenced children's language, social, cognitive, and problem solving skills and development.

- Programs have increased children's healthful development as mediated by maternal health education and services activities.

- Programs have increased children's exposure to their environment through guided parent and child involvement through field trips, literacy activities, and monthly home visits.

- Programs have had a positive impact on children's social competence through parental involvement in child development training, family management, and parent-child interaction skills.

The problem with measuring program impact on children's development is that most parent education efforts are process oriented and focus on long-term family wellness. It is also apparent that our measures of children's progress in various areas of development are limited. Suffice it to say that good programs do have a positive influence on children, to what degree and in what specific ways remain to be fully determined as instruments and program designs become more sophisticated.

Parent-child interactions are central to the goals of most parent education programs. Indeed, most parents express an interest in parent and family programs because they are seeking help on how to best relate to their child's development and learning (Cataldo, 1987). Another dimension of this outcome area is the observation of professionals that at-risk parents often lack the skills and/or supports essential to having positive interactions with their children. Research suggests that parent education can positively influence parent-child relationships in various ways (Brooks, 1987; Swick, 1984; Weiss & Jacobs, 1988).

- Programs have helped parents develop attitudes and behaviors for forming close emotional relationships with their infants and toddlers.

- Programs have supported in parents the development of positive ways of interacting with their children.

- Programs have increased parent knowledge of appropriate ways to relate to and interact with children, particularly with regard to children's play.

- Programs have helped professionals to become more sensitive to the cultural factors involved in parent-child interaction patterns.

- Programs have positively influenced parental attitudes toward the value of children's active involvement in family living.

- Programs have helped to reduce negative parenting behaviors with children through discussion group and application strategies.

- Programs have increased parental attention to the value of positive home learning environments.

Parent outcomes of parenting programs are, in a sense, the real substance of the education and support process. As Ira Gordon (1976) noted, whatever results in positive change in parents has a built-in long-term influence on children. In this perspective, it is possible that many programs have evaluated the wrong set of outcomes, often focusing on child-centered behaviors and skills. Yet children's long-term behavior is very much connected to the way parents function. Powell (1989, p. 107) reviews some of the more substantive possibilities of parent impact.

- Programs increase parental abilities for social and language interaction with their children.

- Programs improve parents' knowledge of child development, particularly as related to developing appropriate expectations for children's behavior.

- Programs influence in parents the development of positive attitudes toward their children.

Beyond these traditional findings are more recent findings on what might be called *the process behaviors of being a competent parent*. In this regard, Powell (1989), Cochran & Henderson (1990), Gordon (1975), Swick (1984), and Weiss & Jacobs (1988) report various possibilities.

- Programs help parents improve their self concepts.

- Programs help parents strengthen their personal competence skills.

- Programs increase parental involvement in school and community activities.

- Programs strengthen parents' problem solving skills.

- Programs increase parents' knowledge of the parenting process.

Family system outcomes represent the more recent focus on the potential of parent education for the entire family context (Swick, 1991). The recognition that education and support efforts ultimately become integrated into the fabric of the family has influenced researchers to look at this broader picture. Walker & Crocker (1988, Chapter 6) review the "family systems" context in relation to possible outcome factors. Five dimensions of the family system provide the framework for evaluation: *structural, controls/sanctions, emotions/affective needs, cultural aspects, and developmental aspects.* Scholars from various disciplines have studied family change in relation to educational and support processes, mostly through self-reports and observation. *Potential family system impacts* are reviewed as follows:

- Programs improve the family's ability to structure itself for productive relationships.

- Programs increase family competence with regard to sharing the control process so that members have a sense of involvement in each others lives without feeling the need to "control" others.

- Programs strengthen the family's understanding and skills for better meeting each others emotional and affective needs.

- Programs increase the family's ability to enrich their cultural system through meaningful relationships with others in the community.

- Programs increase the family's knowledge and skills for better responding to developmental changes that occur over the family's life span.

Family stress management has become an important objective of parent education as a result of the tremendous increase in the kinds of stressors most families now confront (Swick, 1987). Consider the types of "parent/family coping" programs that have emerged over the past decade: single-parent support projects, parent education for parents of premature infants, education and support efforts for families with developmentally delayed children, drug and alcohol rehabilitation projects, educational and training programs for the chronically unemployed, and stress management training efforts (Krauss, 1988).

Two prominent family stress assessment tools are the *Parenting Stress Index* and *The Family Inventory of Life Events and Changes*. Both instruments have been used to take stock of the family's ability to deal with change, particularly stressors that have special significance during the early childhood years. Weiss & Jacobs (1988) include in their work a review of the potential impact of parent education in this area of family living.

- Programs increase parent and family understanding of the nature of the stressors they confront.

- Programs strengthen the "support structure" of the family for better responding to stress.

- Programs increase parent skills for dealing with specific stress such as in the case of better relating to a child's specific handicaps.

- Programs empower families in a preventive way through family stress management training.

- Programs increase the parental focus on preventive stress management through role playing, peer mentoring, and networking.

Social support outcomes of parent education have generally focused on increasing the family's ability to develop and maintain a viable family-environment relationship (Swick, 1987). The desired outcome is in the direction of enabling families to build and then refine their social support network (inclusive of informal and formal support resources) in ways that empower parents and children. Powell (1989) and Cochran & Henderson (1990) review the highlights of findings on this facet of parent education. Additional findings have emerged from the work of Weiss & Jacobs (1988).

- Programs increase parent knowledge of available social supports in their neighborhood and community.

- Programs increase parent skills for accessing available social supports in the community.

- Programs strengthen parent self-confidence in becoming a part of their natural social support system.

- Programs help parents develop leadership skills for developing and strengthening social support networks.

- Programs improve parent performance within existing social support systems.

Long-term child, family, and society outcomes of parent education and family support programs are receiving renewed attention. Given the findings of research on exemplary parenting programs having long-term effects on the lives of children, policymakers have focused more than ever on the preventive and cost-effectiveness of parent/family oriented early childhood education programs (Dimidjian, 1989; Lazar, 1976). These findings (which have recently been further substantiated as noted by White, 1988) suggest that preschool parent and family oriented programs appear to influence powerfully the later behaviors of children and parents. For example, reductions in crime, unemployment, time on welfare, and related antisocial indicators are correlated with parent and child involvement in quality early childhood experiences of a comprehensive nature (Swick, 1987, 1991). Even more encouraging is the evidence that children stay in school longer, are more consistent in their daily attendance, more proactive in their school involvement, and more successful in attaining higher education and meaningful jobs as adults (Dimidjian, 1989). These indicators of success seem to emerge from the increased focus of parents on educational and social expectations for their children. With an increase in parent self-confidence and parent self-competence comes stronger child and family involvement in positive and productive living.

Chapter Fifteen

Supporting Families: Special Roles For Schools

Developing more intense relationships with families is not new for early childhood programs and schools. There are historical precedents for the comprehensive school, where family and community resources are integrated with the educational program and more intimately connected to the total mission of teaching and learning (Swick & Duff, 1978). What is new are the types of challenges involved in supporting families as a part of the formal educational system. The past fifty years have seen a plethora of stressors invade family life as well as the very nature of the family-school relationship. In response to these stressors, a multitude of social support agencies and groups have emerged to offer piece-meal services. In effect, a large but loose array of supports have often overwhelmed families, not really addressing their needs and often causing more problems than serving as a positive force (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

Professional early childhood educators and parents have recognized the need for a more collaborative and supportive relationship. In particular, declining school performance, increases in school discipline problems, and increments in other antisocial child and adolescent behaviors have alarmed parents and teachers of every dimension of our society. Increased societal expectations for parents and teachers have also played a major role in stimulating an increased interest in school involvement in parent education. Reflective of this increased attention to parent education and involvement is Berger's (1991) observation that the number of articles in professional journals and the number of actual school programs that are family oriented have increased dramatically over the 1980s.

Perhaps the recognition by parents themselves that the job of parenting requires continuing renewal, educationally and socially—has influenced schools to be more responsive to parents and families. Consider the types of challenges parents face: complex child development decisions (particularly regarding out-of-home care), family management stress in a time of revolutionary social change, dealing with daily management issues (particularly dealing with after school care arrangements), relating effectively to their child's educational and social development needs, building effective social support structures for the family, and negotiating all of these "family" decisions in relationship to personal, marital, and/or friendship dynamics (Skolnick, 1991).

School professionals have also recognized the decline in the "infrastructure" that is essential to family functioning. Economic decline, increases in divorce and related marital stress, less family time for identity building, and fewer natural family and neighborhood supports have taken their toll on parents and children, especially during the early childhood years (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). One especially evident outcome of this changed context for families has been less involved parents. Unfortunately, the teaching profession may have influenced this process by over-emphasizing the specialty role of the teacher. In far too many cases, parents were leaving the business of education at the school door. The results have been disastrous.

Another major influence on schools has been the findings of research on *school readiness*. Researchers have substantiated the fact that educated, involved, and growing parents have a powerful influence on children's academic and social competence (Bloom, 1981, 1985; Hamburg, 1992; Schaefer, 1991; Swick, 1991). For example, one significant finding was that much of children's school performance is determined by two status-contexts: the child's general intellectual and developmental status, and the school's basic "readiness" to support the child in nurturing, challenging, and appropriate ways (Benard, 1992). Involved parents can positively influence both status-contexts. They can, for example, establish attachment relationships with the child, protect the child, connect the child to needed basic health and wellness services, enrich the child's life through meaningful learning, and many other supportive activities. Likewise, parents are the primary linkage for the child to outside forces like schools. Through meaningful parent involvement they can mediate school variables like placement, curriculum, and positive home learning (Rich, 1987).

As Schaefer (1991) notes, parent behaviors developed during the child's early life (infancy/toddlerhood) are amazingly consistent over the family's life span. Uninvolved mothers of infants remained uninvolved when their children reached kindergarten. Thus, Schaefer's message is that parent education as connected to schools can and must establish learning partnerships very early in the family's development. White (1988) emphasizes the same message in his work with parent education. One of the most successful early childhood programs of this century (Exemplary Head Start Projects) point to the education and involvement of parents as the underlying foundation of their success story (Midco, 1972; Lazar, 1976; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Swick, 1984). More recently, Weiss & Jacobs (1988) report on the newer measures used to assess the more complex elements of parent education and involvement.

The social and public policy recognition that parents need to be better connected to their environment has been another positive influence. Powell (1989) and Rich (1987) both observe that the plethora of *professional specialty services* for families have become so enormous that some unifying place and source is needed to help families make sense of this puzzle. For example, in spite of the availability of immunization services for children, more children than ever in recent times show up at school lacking in needed immunizations. Similar situations exist regarding health care, literacy supports, and other services. Lack of knowledge about services, lack of support on accessing services, and a lack of a value system that values growth-promoting services presents tremendous barriers to family wellness (Cataldo, 1987).

Thus, *the realization that schools have a special role to play in supporting families during the early childhood years* is connected to the many forces that are indeed stimulating schools to restructure and reshape their environment and mission (Swick, 1991). The ecological nest in which parents and children grow and develop needs continuity, nurturance, and continual enrichment. This "nest" needs to begin its development at least at birth and be inclusive of everyone connected to the child's life. The lost opportunities for learning and healthy development between birth and the child's entrance into school can be enormous (White, 1988). Further, the splintered nature of many available services continues to haunt our search for effectiveness in strengthening families. *Schools can provide the following services to families through direct and/or indirect involvement in parent/family oriented efforts.*

- Organizing and offering parent education programs during the preschool years.
- Offering preschool child development services.
- Providing coordination of "family services" through family service centers.
- Sponsoring "parent hot lines" on family services for the preschool years available in the community.
- Initiating and participating in interagency efforts that focus on family strengthening.
- Providing leadership training programs for parents.
- Helping parents develop social support networks and mentoring programs.

Examples of School Sponsored Parent/Family Programs

Until recently, school efforts to provide parent education and family support projects during the preschool years were seen as exploratory and experimental (Swick, 1984). This was basically because the school's role was viewed in limited and isolated ways. In some states, even kindergarten was viewed as a "revolution" or as a frill not really necessary (Osborn, 1991). *The success of many of the early school ventures with parent education* has prompted schools in general to look more closely at this practice. The preventive power of early parent and family intervention and support is becoming a basic principle for school thinking and action. Swick (1984, p. 232) comments on this power and influence:

> Not only are we rapid learners during the early childhood years, but we can develop many problems if they are not diagnosed and treated. Family centered practices have proven effective in preventing many learning and development problems in young children. A support system perspective toward the family is essential if we desire to influence the long range development of children.

The *Parents As Teachers* project (already reviewed in Chapter Fourteen), is based in Missouri's schools and has become institutionalized within the thinking and functioning of its professionals. As noted previously, multiple services (information on parenting and child development, developmental assessments, health care, and other needed supports) are coordinated through a case-management system and linked to the child (and the parent's) school life (Winter, 1985). While Minnesota's MELD program is more community-centered, some of the more assertive efforts have been closely linked to family-centered schools.

Public schools have engaged in parent education efforts in three basic ways: the offering of *education for parenthood* courses for middle and high school students, the offering of *parent education/family support* programs for parents of preschool aged children, and the continuing of that process with *education and support projects* for parents of children enrolled in the school's programs (Swick, 1984).

Hamner & Turner (1991) review the most common programs that *focus on middle and high school students*. The "Exploring Childhood" program (developed by the Education Development Center) provides high school students with information and practical experiences on child development and family life. It is offered by schools as a regular part of the curriculum or, in some cases, as a special course offering. Typically, the focus is on enriching the adolescent's understanding of child development, parenting, and family life. The "Middle Road Families Program" is similar to the "Exploring Childhood" effort with the emphasis on middle school children. It, too, focuses on combining knowledge and experiences on child and family life. Swick & Duff (1982) provide examples of parenting/caring experiences for younger children that support in them the development of skills that relate to becoming competent and caring parents and citizens. The move to integrate parenting and family life information into the school's total program has been slow, often impeded by disagreements over the role of the school in this process—particularly as articulated by conservative religious groups. In spite of concerns over focus and curricula, most parents and professionals strongly support the inclusion of parent/family education into the curriculum (Berger, 1991).

Parent education for parents of preschoolers as sponsored by schools takes on many forms. Of particular interest to schools is the growing number of teen-parents. Thus, some school projects have focused on this group of parents in particular. The *Maternal and Infant Care Project* in St Paul, Minnesota, is an example of a teen-parent program. It provides teen parents with comprehensive health and social support services to enable them to complete their education and to become competent parents. On-site child care, counseling, and parent education are basic services offered (Hamner & Turner, 1991). One of the most interesting "teen-parent" support programs is *The Resource Mother Program*. Unger & Wandersman (1988, Chapter 6) describe the major goals of the this project:

> The specific aims included: (a) increasing appropriate use of medical and social services; (b) reducing perinatal complications; (c) improving maternal childrearing attitudes and parenting behaviors; (d) promoting maternal confidence, sense of control, and self-esteem; (e) promoting infant competence; and (f) reducing social isolation.

This effort was coordinated and carried out by "Resource Mothers" who were selected for their warmth, parenting competence, and ability to relate to teen-parents. The program included nine elements: home-based delivery of services, paraprofessionals as home visitors, nurturing resource mother-teenager relationships, cost-effectiveness, use of teenager strengths, specific curriculum, individualization of services, social network involvement, and integration with the community. The program found its success with teenagers who also had "family or kin support" to buffer the harsh realities of the economics and socioeducational tasks involved in being both a parent and a developing adolescent. In effect, school or community sponsored parent education and support programs for teenagers with children can only be successful when they are totally integrated with other supportive community efforts. As in the case of other parent education efforts, this project noted that information and "social support" alone will not address the complex needs of "high risk" teenagers.

An excellent example of a collaborative public school-community preschool parent education program is the *Brookline Early Education Project*. Based on the theory that parents are the child's most influential teachers, *BEEP* had three interrelated components: parent education and support, diagnostic monitoring, and education and enrichment for children (Berger, 1991). Parent education focused on the first three years of life (with a special emphasis on health) and was delivered through home visits, parent groups and activities at the center. The diagnostic monitoring component serves as a possible model for schools in their efforts to assure that children reach school with good health, thus preventing many learning disabilities.

> The children were periodically screened by staff at Children's Hospital Medical from the age of 2 weeks until entry into kindergarten. The 2-week exam was neurologic; at 3 months there was a physical and developmental exam; at 6, 11, 24, 30, and 42 months there were physical, sensory, and developmental exams. During this 5-year period there were two dental screenings and one lead and anemia screening. Health history was completed at age 3 and upon entry into kindergarten (Berger, p. 238).

The program also involved the children in a High/Scope type of program of learning activities. In addition, the program offered: a family center, library books and materials, films and videotapes on parenting and child development, special family enrichment activities, and transportation for parents to get to *BEEP* programs.

South Carolina has sponsored pilot projects in preschool parent education and family support through special funding for innovative public school efforts. One of the school-community-university partnership efforts is *Project Focus* (Swick, 1991). Its design called for experimenting with comprehensive parent education and family support strategies that would be effective in poor, rural areas. Service delivery methods included: home visits, group meetings, close involvement with child development, kindergarten, and primary teachers, interagency collaboration, community awareness, individual family services, and other activities such as community-wide training programs. The major emphasis of the program was on reaching at risk families during the preschool years with a comprehensive home visit, case management system that was linked to the early school years. Home visitors had monthly contacts with the parents, worked with the children in child development (and kindergarten-primary) classrooms, involved the parents in small group meetings (where both information and networking were emphasized), and provided intensive efforts to meet particular family needs.

Basic health needs, food, shelter, adult education, social support, and family-school relationships were some of the service areas that received considerable attention. Swick (1992) notes that Focus operated on an important assumption: ***that all families have strengths and that they can actualize these strengths when their contexts include resources needed for pursuing a wellness life style.*** Thus, the project worked with the entire family and all of the systems that influenced the family. A concern that permeated the efforts of the home visitors was that of attending to all reasonable family concerns that might strengthen their context.

Another South Carolina Target 2000 Parent Education Pilot Project was *Project Faces.* This project had the primary mission of: improving the effectiveness of parents to serve as the primary teachers of their children, break the intergenerational cycle of under-education, increase the parental self confidence and ability to work positively with the schools as partners in their child's education, provide a unique total family support system through multiagency networking, and improve the academic success of preschool children (Swick, 1992).

Faces utilized five interrelated means of carrying out its functions: Adult Literacy, Parent Education, Child Assessment, Interagency Community Collaboration, and Case Management.

The Adult Literacy Component provided individualized services to parents that aimed to strengthen their educational skills. Through intra-school cooperative arrangements with the adult education staff, parents were able to pursue GED courses, special training classes, and other literacy enhancing experiences with support from the *Faces Project.*

The Parent Education Component used various means to reach at risk families on an individualized basis while also providing group sessions on selected topics for the entire parent population. A unique feature of the parent education effort is the *Preschool Clubs.* These clubs are open to all parents in the community and attempt to promote parent networking, parent leadership, and information and support for parents of preschool children.

The Child Assessment Component is integrated into all aspects of the program. Utilizing "Child Find" a comprehensive developmental assessment process has been provided for many children in the community. In particular, children receiving intensive services have been involved in both assessment and follow-up procedures. The "Dial R" assessment instrument and child development check list have been used in this process. It also includes speech, hearing, and vision screenings. Comprehensive health assessment and needed services are integrated into the parent education and the school-based child development program activities. The assessment effort is initiated in the infant years and related to needed family support efforts.

The Interagency Collaboration Component is carried out through the use of an Interagency Community Council. This council provides coordination of needed family services and promotes many partnership efforts among agencies and groups that serve families. Social services, parent education, health care services, family literacy services, and related family strengthening activities are promoted and supported by this Council.

The Case Management Component of the program provides the organizational system by which services are targeted in useful and productive ways. Through an individualized family management system, particular services such as housing, medical attention, health care, social services, counseling, drug rehabilitation, adult education, abuse counseling, and crisis support services have been provided. The case management process aims to help families become competent in controlling and guiding their lives.

Schools are also finding success with parent education programs for the kindergarten-primary school years. Two programs that represent what can be achieved through such efforts are: *The Rural Partnership For School Success Project and The Learning Goes Home Project* (Swick, 1991).

The Rural Partnership For School Success Project had the basic mission of enhancing the school success of at risk kindergarten and first-grade children through strengthening parent-teacher partnerships. Swick (1991, p. 92) describes the focus of this program:

> The central focus of this program was to provide a comprehensive learning program in which teachers, parents, and home-school leaders would acquire a variety of skills to strengthen their individual and collaborative efforts in supporting children's learning in school and at home.

Major partnership building strategies used in the project were home visits, parent-training programs (in which teachers often served as resource leaders), conferences, home learning activities, (each classroom had a home learning center), in-classroom involvement of parents, a computer home-loan program, take-home video-taped parenting programs, and a plethora of informal involve-ment opportunities. The educational focus was carried out through various specific and integrated activities.

Parent training on topics such as "How Children Learn Math," "How Children Learn Feelings," and "Parents, Teachers, and Children: Learning About Computers Together."

Home learning activities were preceded by parent training sessions. Activities for parents to use at home included learning games, print materials, computer software, and other manipulative materials.

In-classroom involvement focused on both educating parents on ways they could help their children and on helping them become good observers of children's behavior. These opportunities also provided parents with a chance to practice using many of the home learning activities with the help of a teacher or home-school worker.

Swick (1991, p. 94) describes the integrated focus of the parent education aspect of the project and the attempt to bring parents and children closer together.

> Throughout the project an effort was made to bring parents into close contact with their children and their children's teacher(s) in learning situations that directly related to the children's success. For example, when the children were learning to read a book like *Kelly Bear Feelings*, parent activities were related to this focus. Parent-training activities revolved around the book and the processes involved in children's learning how to express and relate to their feelings. A copy of the book was provided for each family and parents were encouraged to discuss the book and to share with their children stories of feelings they had when they were children. Some parents came into the classroom and read to their children; others helped the children make mobiles of feelings for display throughout the school. A similar process was used with parents who could participate only through home visits. *This design of "matching" classroom learning emphases and home-learning activities proved to be highly successful; it was a way that all parents could engage in learning activities that had a direct influence on what their children were learning at that time.*

The Learning Goes Home Project evolved from the work at the Home and School Institute (HSI) by Dorothy Rich and others (Rich, 1987). The basis of this project is the "parent as teacher" and/or the "parent as tutor" idea. Inherent in this design is the recognition that parent-teacher activities are best initiated through learning experiences that emanate from children's involvement within the classroom.

Further, this approach is based on assumptions that all families are in a position to become meaningfully engaged in school and home learning efforts:

- All children have experiences that are meaningful to them; some children's experiences are simply different.
- Home environments, no matter how poor, are places of care and concern for children.
- All parents have the abilities, when properly supported, to help their child succeed in school.
- Family potential can be readily activated into practical support for children and schools.
- Teachers, in search of promoting parent involvement, should start with family strengths, not with their deficits.
- All teachers can initiate some form of positive home learning through positive relationships with parents.

A key strategy used in this approach is the "Home Learning Recipe." "Recipes" are specific, practical, no-cost activities for learning at home. During the early childhood years these recipes focus on experiences parents and children can carry out within their natural contexts of living: cooking activities, sharing of books and magazines, story-telling, family sharing times, and many other activities. The goal of these experiences is to build healthy family relationships and a foundation for skills for school success.

Based upon the success of the HSI approach, Rich (1988) further refined the model with the development of ***MegaSkills***. In a sense, these are skills that are needed before children can fully engage in the acquisition of school-based skills. As Rich (1987, p. 90) states:

> It is generally agreed that children need certain basic skills (usually called the three R's) in order to succeed in school. But, for children to learn these basic skills at school, they need to learn another important set of basics at home. I call these "MegaSkills." This is the curriculum that is taught at home. It's reinforced in the classroom, but mostly it has to be taught by the family.

These MegaSkills include the behaviors, attitudes, and constructs that children need in order to be full partners in the learning process. Rich's MegaSkills (1988) include: Confidence, Motivation, Effort, Responsibility, Initiative, Perseverance, Caring, Teamwork, Competition, Common Sense, and Problem Solving. Through a design that is built around appropriate activities for varying developmental and age ranges, one can build an early childhood MegaSkills curriculum for the home.

Schools have also found it to be beneficial to offer *parent education programs that inform and involve parents in learning about the curriculum, the school's overall program, and particular features of their child's experiences in school.* In effect, an educational conversation should be ongoing between teachers and parents with regard to goals, strategies, resources, evaluation, and related program issues.

Guidelines For Promoting The Family Oriented School

The development of a school that is truly family oriented must be a priority of everyone in the school. The initial focus should be on building a positive and facilitative attitude among staff and parents. Teaching and learning must be viewed as collaborative processes by which everyone involved benefits and contributes (Swick, 1984). In this context, parent education and family support are viewed as integral to every aspect of the family-school relationship and not just as processes that occur within special programs. The following are discussion points that schools can use as they articulate guidelines for promoting parent/family education and support efforts.

The formation of positive family-school linkages occurs when people are *communicating* with each other regarding common concerns that form a basis for having a sincere helping relationship. A first question to be explored is: *Are we communicating with parents regarding their needs, the school's needs, and the needs of the children?* As this question is seriously studied, the views of parents and the perceptions of professionals can be integrated into an educational and support process that is truly meaningful. True communication calls for "listening" to each other and responding to each other's needs (Galinsky, 1990).

Communicating with families in an intentional manner is essential to laying a foundation for a supportive relationship. This process takes time, planning, and continued effort. It must be a part of the school's daily activities. A random approach will not suffice, what is called for are means by which regular parent-teacher exchanges are possible.

Planning for family-school communication may take many different forms. For example, initial efforts may take place in group settings or through informal contacts with parents. A more systematic approach can be formed through the use of advisory and decision making teams. The following are just some examples of ways that schools have initiated this needed communication process (Swick, 1984, p. 236).

- Prior to the opening of school telephone contacts where families are informed of plans for the school year.
- Letters to each family that welcome them to the new school year and provide them with an overview of upcoming events.
- Staff visits to families of the children entering school. These visits can provide information, a chance for parent-teacher sharing, and a way of establishing a trusting relationship.
- Media awareness activities that alert parents to the important items for opening school on a positive note.
- Opening of school discussion times where parents can share their ideas and concerns offer an excellent chance to shape the beginnings of a positive partnership.

These practices help to begin the educational and support process in a positive way. They can and should be supplemented with more formal procedures so that the communication link between family and school is nurtured throughout the school year. As Swick & Duff (1978) point out, as parents sense that their concerns are recognized and acted on by school personnel they tend to increase their level of involvement in parent education activities.

Directing the teaching process toward the total family is an essential guideline for organizing a family-oriented school. Parent education must be interrelated with an overall family-oriented approach to teaching and learning. Involving parents in educational plans, responding to their inquiries in meaningful ways, and attending to the individual needs of children are some of the key ways we model a family-oriented teaching approach. Continual input from parents, their participation as resource persons, and teacher-parent study teams are some additional examples of how this process can be nurtured (Rich, 1987).

Responding to the unique needs of today's families is a critical guideline for family-oriented schools. For example, where both parents work to support the family—the need for extended-day care may be essential. Such care should be in the form of meaningful learning and enrichment: crafts, tutoring, sporting events, fine arts activities, interest courses, and other viable experiences (Mayesky, 1979; Skolnick, 1991). Other needs of both an educational and support nature include: parent education, drug counseling, family management, parent-child relations, positive discipline, and many other needs. Positive responses to these types of needs exemplifies an *active parent education perspective* (Powell, 1989).

Being accessible to families is yet another guideline for family-oriented schools. Accessibility is more than an open door policy. It is an intentionally designed environment where parents are encouraged to participate in the learning and development of their children. This philosophy is visible in the many different avenues for parents and professionals to participate in mutually beneficial activities. One way some schools are actualizing this guideline is through the development of a "place" in the school for families. Be it a family center or a parent-place, the emphasis is on involving the total family in learning. Within this "place" is a psychological and physical environment that says to parents: *You are the most important person in your child's life and we want you to be a part of their education.* "Invitations" are more than simple memos in such schools, they are evident in conferences, home visits, parent volunteer programs, parent leadership training, and other dimensions (Purkey & Novak, 1984).

Involving parents in utilizing their educational competence with others through leadership and advocacy roles is critical to the family-oriented paradigm (Comer & Haynes, 1991). Schools who have parent education and family support as a serious mission develop and use leadership training for parents. Parents are engaged in decision-making roles, utilized as resource teachers, encouraged to advocate in the community for quality education, and are supported in their efforts. This leadership and advocacy role often emerges from parental involvement in classroom support roles. It is also seen in parental advocacy through participation on boards, improvement councils, and in creating strong parent-teacher organizational systems (Swick, 1984).

Family oriented schools *foster increased professional competence and sensitivity to parent/family issues through continued training and education.* Swick & McKnight (1989) noted that more parent education took place in classrooms where teachers were trained in this paradigm. They also found more teacher sensitivity to parent and family issues in teachers who were "professionally involved" and who were continuing to pursue further training and education.

Characteristics of Schools that Empower Families

What are supportive, family oriented schools like? What differentiates these schools from others? And, what should schools strive to achieve in the future if they hope to maintain and enrich their family orientation? Underlying the supportive school is a *philosophy that recognizes the ecological and developmental nature of learning.* That is, children learn not only in school but in many settings and through interactions with many people. Parents and teachers, being the lead people in this human development process, can provide the model for shared-learning by working together in various capacities. Thus, family-supportive schools recognize these ecological and developmental dynamics of the learning process, and *use various human resources to pursue a collaborative and nurturing family-school learning relationship* (Swick, 1991).

In a sense, family oriented schools create an atmosphere where the "human family" permeates the learning process. In such schools you will find many human resource activities: senior citizens reading stories to young children; high school students "coaching" elementary school children in sports and crafts activities; parents serving as resource teachers; citizens and parents providing leadership on advisory and site-based decision making teams; business and industry collaborating as resource and support helpers; and various other "family and community" services (Swick & Miller, 1979; Swick & Duff, 1982).

Connected to this family-focused emphasis is another emphasis: *the belief in the uniqueness of each person* (Purkey & Novak, 1984). In highly supportive schools, parents, children, and professionals are treated as individuals with talent and as persons who have needs and feelings. People take time to learn about each other and to be supportive of each other in authentic ways. Children's work and parental involvement products are proudly displayed throughout the school and community. Education is seen as challenging and as a celebration of everyone's contributions. Labeling and tracking are avoided, the emphasis is on the strengths of each person. The views of parents and children are valued and used to guide the overall development of the learning environment (Satir, 1988).

Supportive schools have integrated the practice of *collaborating with families in the educational and support planning process* (Dunst, Trivette, & Deal, 1988). The process of creating a vision for the school is a "family affair," both in the sense of imagining what the school can become and in the sense of actualizing this vision. Many different avenues are used to achieve this collaboration: informal feedback, advisory groups, teacher-parent feedback sessions, surveys, open school discussions, and other strategies. It is an integrated process where teachers want to be in partnership with parents and the community. This collaboration process is supplemented with continual education and problem solving supports.

More than anything, *the supportive school is an inviting place to learn and develop* (Swick, 1987). Five characteristics of the "inviting learning environment" are: respect for the uniqueness of the individual, emphasis on the cooperative spirit, promotion of a sense of belonging, creation of a pleasant habitat, and the fostering of high and positive expectations (Purkey & Novak, 1984). These attributes are applied to all who are involved in the learning environment and they serve as a continual source of renewal for professionals and parents.

Family cultural, social, and individual uniqueness are respected in the family oriented school (Powell, 1989). Parents and families are not compared, at least not in the negative sense. Rather, the human richness of each family is valued and used in the positive sense. The talents, needs, and problems of each family are truly viewed in the supportive sense. Religious, cultural, personal, and social preferences are respected and indeed used as a source of enrichment for everyone in the school.

A "family and school identity" is promoted in the supportive school. Children and parents have a place and a part in the school's operation. Families have a sense of "ownership" and everyone is encouraged to take "pride" in the school and in each other's special part in it (Swick, 1991). This sense of belonging is promoted through the engagement of parents and children in many school improvement projects and through the involvement of staff and parents in supportive activities.

An appealing and pleasant environment is characteristic of supportive schools. This "appeal" is more than a surface thing, it is present most importantly in the relationships between people. The environment is indeed comfortable, safe, enriching, stimulating, and open to being influenced by all of the learning team. Typically, you will find plants growing, children's work on display, people helping each other, parents sharing their talents, teachers modeling prosocial behaviors, and children busy exploring new worlds of learning (Swick, 1984). Most critically, the supportive school seeks to carry out on a daily basis the suggestions of Satir (1988, pp. 369-370):

- Communicate clearly
- Cooperate rather than compete
- Empower rather than subjugate
- Enhance individuals rather than categorize
- Guide rather than force
- Love, value, and respect everyone
- Be personally and socially responsible
- Use problems as challenges and opportunities to be creative

Family oriented schools *promote positive and high expectations for learning*. This is particularly the case in quality early childhood programs where positive self esteem is the foundation of learning. Teachers and parents work together to promote in each other and in the children an ethos that everyone can learn. What demarcates high support schools is their daily actions to integrate this philosophy into the real learning activities of the children and parents. Parent education is directed toward creating strong, positive, and nurturing parent-child relationships (Powell, 1988).

One of the most encouraging directions of the future is the move toward *Family Service Centers* within the structure of schools. Beginning with child care and continuing throughout the early childhood years, parents and families have continual contact with schools. It is within early childhood programs that families should be able to find the continuity of services that is so essential to their coping with the realities of parenting and family life. Boyer (1991) advocates that schools establish "readiness centers" where parent education and support are regular services, with a focus on preparing all children for a positive school experience. Beyond this "readiness" function, however, is the need to provide families with a system by which they can grow and become healthy and positive members of the society. The following design offers a map for schools to use in building family-oriented, family-friendly places. This design has emerged from over thirty years of research and development in early childhood parent education (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Powell, 1989).

Adult Literacy & Enrichment

Parent Education/ Family Support

Family Service Center

Child Development Services

Family Specific Support Services

The elements of this design focus on the critical aspects of parenting, child development, and family life that promote parent and child competence. By creating "family service centers" during the early childhood years many problems can be prevented. For example, *adult literacy and enrichment services* can promote among parents higher educational attainment and improved job skills—which are integral to strong family functioning (Darling, 1989). Likewise, *parent education and family support* can encourage improved parenting skills, better access to needed child and family health services, and a more optimistic effort on the part of parents in carrying out their many roles (White, 1988). *Child development services* can provide the core system where parents and professionals actualize quality learning places for children (Cataldo, 1987). *Family-specific services* offer the chance to prevent specific problems from becoming major risk factors in the lives of families (Swick, 1993).

Ultimately, family supportive schools must actualize a philosophy of support through the creation of systems that address the basic health, social, educational, and emotional needs of families. Family service centers offer one very viable way of accomplishing this need.

Chapter Sixteen

Supporting And Strengthening Families Through Community Efforts

The meaning of the term community is found in various words and phrases such as togetherness, unity, interdependence, forming a union, and linking needs and services. Ecological studies such as those conducted by Bronfenbrenner (1979), Ford & Lerner (1992), and Pence (1988) indicate that the more communities function in harmonious and supportive modes the more positively they are perceived by their members, thus creating a cycle of successful individual-group relationships.

Unfortunately, our current cultural milieu treats learning and development as if they took place in isolation from the various ecological contexts. While many educators acknowledge that learning and development are contiguous and occur simultaneously in all parts of the community, this premise still lacks the total support of the community. Separation of the learning and development process continues when we assign roles to institutions (such as learning for school and socialization for family) and fail to form linkages among schools, businesses and civic agencies. This isolationism is further reinforced when public policy practices actually encourage it (Edelman, 1987).

Children function in a holistic sense: they are influenced by every element of the environment. Positive families, inviting schools, supportive neighborhoods, and family-friendly workplaces and practices go a long way toward creating the needed climate for healthy growth and development. Communities with high crime rates, inadequate schools, chronic unemployment, and other social problems provide unlikely settings for children and adults to develop and learn in productive ways (Hamburg, 1992).

Productive child/family/school relations happen when communities support this mission. While major emphasis has been on the family and school environments as primary socialization influences in the child's development, Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1986) suggests that *the quality of life in this and future generations is also heavily influenced by the workplace, the neighborhood, and the public policy values present in the culture*. In the ecological view, the workplace and what happens to parents within business and industrial contexts strongly influence them and their child and family relationships. The interactional nature of the family and the workplace have become recognized as very powerful dynamics in the lives of children and parents. This is particularly the case in an economy where the talents of everyone are needed on a daily basis. A complex economic system like ours, as Hewlett (1991, 204-205) notes, changes the family-workplace relationship.

> Once upon a time, women anchored a domestic and familial support system that enabled male breadwinners to focus on their jobs for at least forty hours a week. They raised the children, looked after the house, took the clothes to the dry cleaner, and visited Grandma in the hospital. This home-based support system began to recede a generation ago and is now more the exception than the rule. Seventy percent of women with children between the ages of six and seventeen are now in the labor force, as are half of all women with children less than a year old. This new reality has produced tremendous stress and strain in family life. Almost every day, working parents are faced with wrenching dilemmas: Who will take care of the three-year-old who is running a temperature of 104 degrees? Can the seven-year-old be trusted to look after herself between 3:30 and 6:00 P.M.?

In effect, the "good of the family" is now, more than ever, the reality for every group in our society. Business and industry have a major role to play in promoting workplace, school, and community environments that promote healthy families.

Business and Industry as Promoters of Healthy Families and Strong Schools

Business and industry promote healthy family living whenever they engage in practices that strengthen families: community improvement, school support, and direct family support practices (Hewlett, 1991). The interest and involvement of leaders from the business community in families sets a direction for the entire community. It establishes for families a system by which they can become more effective.

Business industry practices supportive of quality family life also serve to enhance school and community life. This is especially true during the formative years of family development. The prevailing attitude in society that places responsibility for child nurturing totally in the hands of parents and teachers is self-defeating. Parents and teachers need a supportive setting with resources and "helping hands" to meet the challenges of caring for and educating the next generation (Swick, 1984). There are several family-friendly workplace practices that business and industry can (and in some cases do) pursue.

One of the most promising techniques for supporting families in meeting the complex needs of work and family life is *alternate work schedules* (Voydanoff, 1987). These alternate work schedules include the use of *flextime* and *part-time work* practices. Flextime was actually introduced initially to meet industrial needs such as meeting demand during peak selling periods or to meet special emergencies. Quickly this practice became popular with parents, particularly those with young children or with an older parent in need of care. The flexibility provided parents is indeed used to meet family and personal social and educational needs (Hengstler, 1975; Voydanoff, 1987).

Part-time work schedules have been in practice for many years. However, this practice has only recently received scrutiny as a family support strategy. In the past this practice was used basically at the whim and need of business. Today, business and industry are experimenting with it as a family support strategy because often they need the expertise of a family member who is unable to work full-time. One problem with this practice is that it is often not accompanied by needed health and income benefits. Progressive companies are now experimenting with full benefits, part-time work schedules and finding the results to be very positive.

Parental leave policies provide another essential element to a comprehensive business/industry family support effort. Leave policies typically center around pregnancy and childbirth, child care, and family medical leave (Kamerman & Hayes, 1982). Until recently, leave policies applied mainly to pregnancy and child birth and were of a minimal nature. Before the Parental and Medical Leave Act of 1986 suggested that a family member have at least 18 weeks of unpaid, job-protected leave, the prevailing policy was 6 weeks. With the revolutionary changes in the nature of workers (women now account for the most rapid increments of labor force new entries), more modern and family-strengthening leave policies are needed (Hewlett, 1991). Maternity/paternity leave policies are only as good as the job-protection and family support they provide. It is vital that business and industry see this practice as mutually beneficial to them and to families. The old paradigm (we versus they) must be replaced with the notion of social investment as essential to strong communities. Swick (1984, p. 215) captures the essence of this new, more progressive approach to leave policies.

> The birth of a child—the initial formation of family life—is a critical time. Adequate maternity/paternity leave practices not only enable parents to begin or expand their families without pressure to return to work immediately after childbirth but stimulate job productivity as well. Moreover, children of parents who have time to form a stable family life tend to be healthier and lead more productive lives. This, in turn, exerts a positive influence on the quality and quantity of industrial output.

Family leave time (consider the current Family & Medical Leave Act passed in 15 states and now Federal Law) needs to encompass medical, social, and educational needs also; a future as changing and complex as that of our society's demands more supportive and mutually beneficial family-workplace relationships (Hewlett, 1991).

Parental and family leave policies that are family-friendly typically create a strong employee base in business and industry. In effect, the satisfied and healthy parent becomes a better worker and their children tend to function better because they are happier and content with a productive family-workplace relationship. Hewlett (1991, pp. 207-213) describes some of the more innovative leave programs and their beneficial effects on families and business.

> *Merck* has demonstrated impressive returns from its parenting leave policy. The price tag attached to replacing an employee at this large pharmaceutical firm is $50,000. But by permitting a new parent to take a generous six-month child-care leave (cost: $38,000, which includes partial pay, benefits, and other indirect costs), the company succeeds in retaining almost all of its new mothers, thereby achieving a net savings of $12,000 per employee.

One very strong company benefit has been the drastic reduction in employee turnover, which is a major cost saving factor. Hewlett goes on to describe IBM's new family support leave package.

> International Business Machines has broadened an already enviable benefits package to make it easier for its 228,000 U.S. workers to balance their careers and private lives. Under the expanded plan, most employees have the option of beginning or ending their working day an hour earlier or later. In addition, IBM employees (30 percent of whom are women) can take a three-year break from full-time employment—with the option of working part-time in the second and third years—to take care of young children or elderly

> relatives. With the exception of the part-time component this "career break" is unpaid, but health and retirement benefits continue while workers are on leave, and IBM guarantees a full-time job at the end of the three years.

While some companies are on the move toward developing family supportive policies, Hewlett warns that far too many are still living in the past and not recognizing the need for change.

Child care support practices is another dimension of business and industry involvement in strengthening families. Corporate leaders, small business owners, and mid-sized companies have used different routes to achieve some effectiveness in this domain. Some companies have sponsored child care centers within the workplace, co-sponsored community child care centers, and/or provided parents with financial support to acquire child care. For parents of school-aged children, a few business and industry groups have sponsored after-school care programs in cooperation with local schools and community groups. Parental competence increases at work and at home when parents have access to quality care for their children (Swick, 1984).

Hewlett (1991, pp. 206-209) provides examples and discussion regarding the emergence of child care support from business and industry.

> In January 1987 the Union Bank opened its first on-site child-care center in a building adjacent to the bank's operations center in Monterey Park, California. To determine the impact of the center on absenteeism, attrition rates, and other costs of doing business, the bank carried out an elaborate cost-benefit study during the first year of operation. The conclusion was that on a number of fronts the center more than paid for itself.
>
> In September 1988, Honeywell introduced a Sick Child Care program for its employees in the Minneapolis area. Under this program, Honeywell subsidizes 80 percent of the cost of providing care for sick children.

The program, by Honeywell's calculations has saved the company $45,000 during its first nine months of operation.

Companies have also found it valuable to support after-school care programs. This is often accomplished by "networking" with other companies in the same community and through collaboration with schools and agencies. Other devices used by companies include the subsidization of parents for child care, sharing of training programs with child care centers in the community, and co-sponsoring leadership training for child care workers (Galinsky, 1990).

Parent education and family support programs have also become a part of the repertoire of business and industry. In cooperation with other community agencies, parenting programs are being offered on prenatal care, family health care, family management, family-workplace issues and strategies, and other topics. Some businesses are using lunch-time seminars as a starting point. Others are using videotaped programs for dissemination for employees. This is not simply a community sensitivity issue with companies, they are realizing as Hewlett (1991, p. 208) points out that it is in their interest to be a part of parent education. She tells how one company realized the real impact poor prenatal care was having on its workforce.

> Sunbeam Appliance Company discovered the importance of prenatal care the hard way. Four premature babies born in 1984 to women working at the company's Coushatta, Louisiana, plant accounted for fully half of the $1 million the company paid that year in health care for 530 employees. One of the babies required so much care that medical bills exceeded the $250,000 limit in major medical coverage.
>
> Shocked by these numbers, the company did some in-house research and discovered that pregnant women who worked at the plant (Sunbeam's labor force is 80 percent female) were waiting too long to see a doctor. So, in 1986, Sunbeam started a prenatal program. Pregnant employees were allowed to take an hour of company time every other week to attend classes in health care and nutrition taught by a specialist in prenatal nursing. In addition, the plant nurse weighed the women weekly, checked their blood pressure, and ran urine tests.

The program has been successful, with only one premature birth since its inception and that birth had no major complications.

Other company initiatives in this area include: offering in-house parenting seminars on parent-child relations, providing parents with "flextime" to attend to personal and family health care, including parenting programs as a part of the company's staff development efforts, and setting up family support centers in the plant (Hewlett, 1991).

Perhaps the most encouraging and challenging indicator that business and industry are becoming "family-friendly" is their move toward designing *comprehensive family benefits packages*. In contrast to single-dimension benefits, many innovative efforts are moving to implement multiple plans where parents can have access to needed health care, child care, family leave, and related supports. While this is encouraging, the reality is that a majority of young families do not have access to these needed benefits. Future efforts toward more supportive benefits need to include more companies and need to become collaborative public-private endeavors.

Additional family support practices of the business/industrial community might include:

- Use of reentry workplace practices for parents who are seeking assistance for reentering the workforce.
- Development of a "work hour bank" for parents to use in emergencies or for becoming involved in school or community improvement projects. Parents would bank hours during overtime, later using them to tend a sick child or become involved in a school activity.
- Use of "work transfer" policies that would make it possible for parents to be promoted within their immediate community, or when necessary, assist mobile families in making the move in a positive manner.
- Development of family advisory councils that would provide business and industrial groups with perspective on how their operations affect families.

Business and industry have major roles to play in supporting schools as a part of their strengthening families and communities mission. Schools, like other community agencies, need linkages and support in order to function effectively. The adult world is in a very real sense the arena from which children draw their images of how education takes on meaning. Unfortunately, this reality is often distorted for lack of meaningful connections to the world of work. Many of our young people are missing out on essential social and emotional facets of healthy development. Coleman (1979, p. 491) states

> We can identify missing socialization tasks by reflecting on what used to be done by the institutions we have said are vanishing. These tasks include learning to take responsibility for others, learning to lead and to follow, learning how to make decisions and take action

> when necessary, and a host of other things that are ordinarily summed up in the words, "becoming adult."

Schools and families alone are unable to accomplish the large task of enabling children and young people to become functional adults. Business and industry can play a significant part in making the community an effective educational and social arena for linking generation to generation, thus enhancing adult-child relationships (Swick, 1984).

Support roles for business and industry might include: fostering school and related educational/recreational/work projects; providing specific schools with materials and resources (such as in the "Adopt A School Program"); engaging in "resource teaching" with schools and community youth groups; serving in advisory capacities such as on improvement councils and boards; offering schools the use of facilities for apprenticeships and job-placements; and supporting community and adult education programs (Swick, 1982).

Business/industrial practices that support employee involvement in the schools may well be one of the most effective means of introducing children to the adult world. For example, companies can provide parents with leave time for taking part in parent-teacher conferences, visiting their children's classroom as a resource person, helping with special projects such as field trips and special study topics. Likewise, other employees might be loaned to schools for specialized teaching. Tutoring, mentoring, and other adult-child support arrangements offer a new dimension to children's school experiences. The visible and participating adult signals to the child that school is a place for everyone (Swick, 1979).

Additional support strategies have been synthesized by Swick (1982, pp. 83-84).

- Membership on school boards and councils
- Advisory work on administrative teams
- Fund raising work on school improvement councils
- Budgeting and accounting assistance for schools
- Transportation management and safety support studies
- Sponsorship of professional improvement programs for teachers
- Provisions for research and work experiences for teachers
- Cooperative work and apprentice programs for students
- Sponsorship of student clubs and activities
- Guidance on updating vocational and technical education programs

In addition, *business and industry can collaborate with schools in many direct volunteer activities.* The use of people power from the corporate community can enhance the total operation of many schools. For example, specialists from a computer technology company could be placed on loan to a middle school to teach a unit or interest course on basic computer applications. Agricultural and dairy businesses can and often do provide early childhood programs with resource people and materials in the areas of food production and processing.

Other types of volunteer involvement include: conducting workshops on particular resources and skills the company can provide teachers, assisting in developing and piloting special curriculum programs, providing a source of field trips related to children's career understanding, sponsoring mentoring and tutoring programs for children, and taking part in ongoing school assessment projects.

As business, industry, community groups, schools, and families develop linkages between childhood and adulthood, a more cohesive, meaningful and productive society results. School and community learning opportunities abound where children can be enriched and families strengthened.

Schools are a "self-contained community" in the sense that they have valuable human resources to share with each other when the environment is effectively organized. Pagano (1982, p. 97) explicates the essence of this resource:

> A school is a small community within itself, and interrelationships between various subsets of the school can help children learn skills needed in the larger community outside of school. Examples include peer education programs and courses where older students work with younger students in reading and writing or in early child care centers. These activities provide children with opportunities to develop leadership skills and to take on responsible roles for the good of society. They also afford opportunities to receive recognition and praise and thus experience the gratification of contributing to their immediate community.

Community groups that serve children play a family strengthening role in whatever positive capacity they use to reach out to children and parents. Some of these groups are national in scope while others reside in the community itself. Pagano (1982, p. 98) describes three efforts where community groups reach out to children.

- *Big Brothers/Big Sisters* of Marion County, Ohio, provides educational tutoring for a Little Brother or Little Sister in an after-school elementary school program.

- *Camp Fire, Inc.*, has a self-reliance program for third- to fifth-graders who may be home alone after school. It teaches how to fix snacks, take care of pets, handle emergencies, find safe things to do, and develop other skills needed in a "latchkey" situation.

- In Memphis, Tennessee, *Girls Club* has adopted a school as part of a community-wide program entitled "Adopt a School." In this program, business and community organizations select a school and commit time and resources to enhance the school's capacity to provide quality educational services that meet specific needs of children in that school.

Community resources (local, regional, state, and national) offer another avenue for supporting children, families, and schools. In an excellent publication (*Learning Opportunities Beyond the School, 1987*), Barbara Hatcher pulls together the possibilities present in or near most communities.

- Community libraries typically provide story hours, special events, and family literacy activities.

- Public library-school collaboration is providing new classroom resources: videotapes, prints, and human support personnel.

- Children's museums reach out by bringing artifacts and other materials to the classroom.

- Museum specials for "family weekends" have become enriching learning resources for everyone in the family.

- Hands-on museums offer excellent field-trip possibilities.

- Quality public zoos now provide organized environmental instruction on-site and in classrooms.

The possibilities are endless with regard to what can be accomplished when families have a strong support network in the form of business, industry, schools, and community learning opportunities.

In order to establish new and more progressive relationships between schools, families, and business, changes in the way we see each other and in how we relate to each other are essential. Swick (1984, p. 221) notes the following as vital changes in the way society functions.

- Parents, educators and citizens must begin to perceive business/industrial settings as more than "places to work" and "places to consume." They must begin to see them as integral parts of the quality of life.

- Business and industrial leaders need to see their roles in the community as more than simply economic. A more comprehensive view of how business affects the lives of families and schools is needed, as well as a view of the laborer that includes his or her personal and family context.

- The concept that profits alone are the determining factor in defining the success of a business venture must be modified. While profits are essential, the qualitative relationships between business and community needs to be incorporated into the success concepts of business and community leaders.

Neighborhoods Can Strengthen Families

Supportive environments for families are a requisite for creating quality social development in children and adults alike. Today's family will function as well as people want it to and no better! Current social and economic practices are hindering the development of healthy families. Currently, it is more appealing to many parents to spend their leisure time away from their children because society tends to glorify non-family activities. These types of values must change if young adults are to grasp the proper significance of parenting (Meyerhoff, 1992).

Our values must shift toward the reality that family strengthening can occur in every facet of our lives. Far too often we view family support as a task performed by formal social agencies or by "others" who have a vested interest. Perhaps one of the most startling discoveries of this century is that everyone has a vested interest in having strong families (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In a very real sense, as research indicates (See Cochran & Henderson, 1990; Cowan & Hetherington, 1991; Dym, 1988; Gunnarsson & Cochran, 1990; Powell, 1987; Powell, 1990), informal support sources are among the most effective. The interrelatedness of support systems (family, school, kin, community . . .) is best actualized when supports closest to the person and family are proactive and effective. Undergirding the more observable support systems like school, work, and social agencies are the informal helping relationships most often found in what might be called *neighborhoods.*

Within the "systems" that families function, parents and children are most productive when those informal, close and intimate relationships (kin, friends, informal helpers) are of a supportive and positive nature. *In the mobile society the neighborhood is more of a psychological and social construct than a geographical one.* Certainly physical proximity is a part of this construct, but the critical element is having access to a network of supportive people (Cochran, 1988). In effect, *the supportive neighborhood* is a network of human relationships in which families (and their informal helpers) have established a nurturing environment that promotes growth and development. Unfortunately, in a complex society such as ours, neighborhoods can become dysfunctional places where people find little help, are unable to identify with their surroundings, and perhaps even experience destructive relationships (Popenoe, 1988). Some families adapt to the unfriendly neighborhood by reaching beyond it to create artificial but useful contacts with schools and other groups. Yet, in stressful situations families appear to respond best when they have secure, positive and helpful neighborhoods.

It is helpful to think of "neighborhoods" as social arenas in which families are able to form meaningful relationships that support them and that offer them chances to contribute to others. In this sense, the helpful teacher, supportive pastor, and friendly neighbor are indeed part of the family's neighborhood.

Neighborhoods are social networks that have the potential of providing the following support for families: social/recreational, emotional, exchange of goods and services, information sharing, and enhancement of developmental and learning processes in children and adults. Neighborhood settings that are active networks of social development may provide families with all of these supports (Brown & Swick, 1979).

A vital characteristic of supportive neighborhoods is that they provide social and recreational contact with others. The need for social contact is especially evident in parents of infants and toddlers. This fact is strongly supported by the work of Cowan, Cowan, Heming, & Miller (1991). They found that couples with infants and toddlers benefitted from the social support of group contact and sharing of information in parenting seminars.

Parents under stress who did not have the availability of talking and sharing with other parents continued to deteriorate in their marital and family relationships. Other research (See McCubbin, McCubbin, & Thompson, 1993) indicates that families who have "social contacts" that enable them to process crises negotiate the adaptations more successfully. More normative family situations also benefit from the social and enrichment process, it enables them to preclude particular stressors and to develop a viable family-environment relationship (Brubaker, 1993).

Emotional support, information sharing, exchange of goods and services, and the developmental processes of family life all require contact with other people and the social context of the "neighborhood" can provide for these contacts. *Another benefit of these social contacts is that they provide a third party support system* in which it becomes valid and expected for helping relationships to occur. For example, in many neighborhoods and/or "social networks" the informal socialization that goes on while carrying out instrumental roles leads to the development and refinement of helping systems such as car pooling, caring for each others' children, or simply listening to each others' difficulties at work (Powell, 1989). When families have access to this "third force" support system they usually function better than when they are isolated from such support (Cowan & Hetherington, 1991).

One of the basic characteristics of strong neighborhoods is that individuals and families perceive the setting as emotionally supportive. In order for this perception to exist, individuals must have contact with others whom they respect, care about, and enjoy. Emotionally enriching relationships with friends strengthens the efficacy of parents and children. As Powell (1993) notes, research confirms that parents (especially parents under heavy stress) who have access to the emotionally supportive substance of friendship relationships tend to handle daily stressors better than parents who lack this support. This support can happen in several ways. It may occur when people confirm in each other their value, competence, and potential. It can also occur when people empathize with each other about personal, parental, and family-related problems or concerns such as children's sleeping patterns, the high cost of food, and other issues typical to the family system.

Another example of this emotional support is found in the sympathetic relationship families share in dealing with grief. McCubbin, McCubbin, & Thompson (1993) share the situation of a family where the father was declared as "missing in action" during the Vietnam Conflict. Utilizing the different "norms" of expectations received in feedback from important others, the mother and the child gradually reshape their lives. It is the emotional support obtained from important other adults that this family is able to negotiate their grief and adaptation to a drastically new situation. In more normative family situations, emotional support can provide a haven from daily stress as well as an affective bridge to dealing with such stress. Positive emotional relationships build confidence, improve self-esteem, and foster new emotional and cognitive skills in children and adults. The preventive power of strong family-neighborhood emotional contexts cannot be overestimated.

Another characteristic of supportive neighborhoods and social networks is the mutual exchange of goods and services. Social networks such as neighborhoods in which goods and services are exchanged (more often than not in an informal manner) provide a support system that expands and enriches the family's context (Pence, 1988). Child care exchange or cooperatives are an excellent example of this process. Not only do families increase their opportunities to deal with non-child care tasks but typically they also learn new ways for dealing with family scheduling and relating to parent-child situations. Sharing of food, lawn utensils, clothing, and other items act as a vehicle for strengthening the fabric of families. More important, these sharing activities usually promote a more active socialization process in the involved parties (Cochran & Brossard, 1979). Beyond the obvious benefits to families, exchange of goods and services engages parents and children in acquiring social competence for problem solving, expanding their life-skills, and enriching their personal and family relationships.

Information sharing (which is often taken for granted) is a valuable aspect of supportive social systems. For example, finding a pediatrician, gaining child care information, learning about where to get basic health care services, shopping information, and literally hundreds of other issues are topics of sharing among neighbors and friends. Knowing that other children in the neighborhood are going through the same stages as your child can be consoling. Realizing that other families face budget and relationship stressors is also comforting. Information sharing is more than simply gaining knowledge from others, it is a mutual sharing of ideas, feelings, and knowledge. In many cases, parents are so busy meeting the needs of children that they have little time to share with each other. Yet, as Powell (1989) notes, when parents are together in group settings their discussion often centers on topics of jobs, sales, personal issues, and family management topics.

Job seeking information, choosing a church, problem solving, and knowing how to use the community environment are topics of interest to most parents at one time or another. In isolation, such activities might appear simple in terms of their value to families, however, when they are combined they have considerable impact on how parents and children function. The author had one parent share with him her experience with gaining information from a grandmother in the neighborhood. She learned how to deal with daily stress from her. Learning to take time for her "self" came from the grandmother. This small piece of information influenced more positive parent-child relationships throughout the day. Information sharing occurs in high-trust relationships, thus requiring a social support system that is stable, positive, and continuous (Cochran & Brossard, 1979).

Finally, *the interactive nature of neighborhoods can be a positive force in nurturing the developmental growth and learning of children and adults.* Knowing that others are available is as important as actually utilizing their talents in providing a sense of security. This need for security is greatest during the family's formative period because the tasks of the journey are being negotiated each day. There is little precedence for most parents in making "family decisions" except for their memories of how their families worked. Thus, the availability of other parents and adult mentors as friends is critical to their positive involvement in healthy family living. Even within high-continuity environments (neighborhoods where kin and support persons are present across the generations) the need for specific family-social network interactions is important (Brubaker, 1993).

What makes for supportive neighborhoods and social network systems? It is the combination of factors within the neighborhood that make it either a supportive social network or a non-supportive one. *Of utmost importance is the perception that the family has of their social support system.* While individual elements of the support system may be less than effective, how does the family (individually and as a group) see the viability of the total system. For example, does the family see itself as accepted, valued, and as an important part of their environment? Or, do family members feel isolated, unimportant, and anxious about their surroundings? Neighborhoods and social networks are only as effective as people make them. Self-other perceptions are the outcome of the interactional process that groups develop within particular environments. Where neighbors view each other as less than positive forces in each other's lives a supportive social system is unlikely. Where neighbors see crime, insecurity, and malaise as prevailing factors in their lives, destructive and pathological processes emerge and "support" is precluded as an expected behavior (Swick & Taylor, 1982). It needs to be noted, however, that even within negative neighborhood settings, strong interpersonal relationship systems are possible when families take action to shape them. The leadership of one or two families can be the force that renews a social network in a positive direction (Wilson & Herrnstein, 1985).

A second factor in determining whether a neighborhood or social network will be supportive or not is how the family perceives its needs, the needs of others, and how these needs can be met. For example, does the family see its needs, such as emotional support or exchange of services, as potentially being met within their social arrangement? In some instances it may be a simple case of identifying existing resources and/or organizing them for supportive purposes. In other situations, it may be a process of developing the resources through parent and family networking. Each family does indeed actualize this process somewhat differently, Yet, all families create some kind of match between their needs and the resources in the environment. Some families, for example, develop their "network" through the church or the workplace. Others rely on the child care center or on close relatives. Most families, particularly those that are growing in healthy modes, use a combination of resources and supports to meet their needs. A major part of this mosaic is how families see themselves as able to contribute to their environment. Their perceptions and skills for shaping positive neighborhood relationships can be influenced through parent and community education. Cochran (1988) noted that parental empowerment through networking, gaining skills for interpersonal functioning, and having access to supportive others was effective in helping families create more viable support systems.

Family stress is a third factor related to the development of families. This factor becomes particularly influential when entire neighborhoods or other social networks are eroding due to common stressors (Popenoe, 1988). Common stressors such as chronic poverty, high crime, illiteracy, and low human resource environments can create an interactive system that promotes weak support settings. Stress from external sources can come in many forms: the rezoning of a neighborhood, the closing of a church, cutbacks at a local factory, natural disasters, and the destructive impact of juvenile crime. These stressors, when happening in combinations in intensive ways, erode both the individual family unit and the "group strength" of total social systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1986). The other side of this process is that in healthy systems stress can become a focal point for neighbors to come together and develop new problem solving skills (Swick, 1984). Indeed, in some cases, serious problems have instigated the formation of social networks that last well beyond their original function, thus creating a support group that enriches the entire community (Popenoe, 1988).

The demography of a neighborhood or social network influences the viability of the system (Swick, 1984). For example, the number of children and the age-makeup of neighborhoods influences the types of activities and the nature of activities carried out by people. Naturally, the types of resources available in social settings dictates the level of social functioning that can take place. While resources like playgrounds, senior citizen centers, recreation centers, cultural activities, and the quality of schools might be taken for granted, they have a critical influence on what people can accomplish. The length of time families stay in a social network is also significant, continuity of interactions usually promotes closer and more enduring relationships. Additional factors include home ownership, educational level, income levels, job opportunities, literacy and cultural resources, and the qualitative features of family living.

Ultimately, neighborhoods and social networks become viable and healthy when the families involved have a sense of coherence, meaning, and mutual appreciation of each other's importance in life. This kind of situation develops most often when community supports such as good health care, quality education, secure community living, and a growing economic and educational environment exists. When neighborhoods have a combination of substantive resources and appealing activities, families have the basis for forming strong relationships.

Neighborhoods and effective social networks are critical elements in the lives of healthy families. Recent research has noted that strong social systems increase the level of family functioning. For example, consider the following findings with regard to what makes for stronger families:

- High quality and affordable child care increases the level of functioning of children and parents (Schorr & Schorr, 1988).
- Safe and attractive neighborhoods promulgate more positive and nurturing interactions among families (Popenoe, 1988).
- Active, positive, and supportive family involvement in social settings is correlated with low crime rates (Wilson & Herrnstein, 1985).
- Quality educational settings are correlated with productive family and community living (Rutter, 1987).
- High-support environments appear to create a preventive force in the lives of families where abuse and neglect are less likely to occur (Edelman, 1987).
- Single-parents are typically more effective in their roles when they have at least one supportive adult (Hetherington, 1979).

Promoting Public Policies Supportive of Families

"It takes a whole village to raise a child!" This saying is more true today than at any point in human history. Unfortunately, our society has yet to take this message seriously. Only when the entire society is serious about having strong families, schools, and support systems is it possible to generate the power to make it happen. For example, when a majority of the nation's children and young families lack adequate health insurance—the social infrastructure is in real danger. When only one-third of the nation's preschool children have access to quality child care—the society's future is bleak! Weak public policy and corresponding weak community values toward children and families precludes the development of a strong base of productive human capital for the future (Edelman, 1992).

Communities need to be in covenant with families and schools regarding the mission of creating life-environments that promote successful living. Everyone in the community needs to see (and act on) the value that the education and well-being of children and families is their priority; teachers and parents must not be asked to handle this role in isolation from the very sources they serve. There are many natural linkages between what goes on in families and schools and the community: learning, work, leisure, social planning, human development, and all of the dynamics that emerge from these events and experiences (Galinsky, 1990). There are also many community services that have a natural connection to children, parents, and teachers: health, social support, economic development, spiritual nurturance, cultural enrichment, and information sharing. These services and processes need to be interrelated so that access, affordability, usefulness, and their overall value to people are integral to the way people want and do live (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Communities can do three very important things to create productive relationships with families and schools: service, support, and collaborative learning (Comer, 1986). In the service dimension, alliances can be created through partnerships that provide health care, family counseling, education, safe neighborhoods, sources of spiritual and social growth, job training, and other services that strengthen families and schools. While these types of services exist in most communities, they are often provided within isolated contexts. Alliances are needed that relate the services to the needs and interests of parents, children, and teachers, especially during the early childhood years when they can serve as points of prevention and growth (Hamburg, 1992). The current focus on providing comprehensive parent and family support services is an exemplary model for communities to emulate.

Community support contexts are emerging in the form of school-business partnerships, cooperative school/work programs, family celebration events, improved health education, school advisory teams, and many other activities (Swick, 1991). Families and schools need these supportive relationships in order to shape a learning environment that is meaningful. Other supportive efforts are needed that help families cope with work/family issues, health needs, and "family time" for dealing with various needs that arise in a complex society (Galinsky, 1987). These and other emerging needs can be met through public policies that promote strong families and schools.

While the relationships between the various sectors of any society are complex, ***there is now a clear indication that public policy and public domain actions strongly influence how families and schools carry out their tasks*** (Haskins & Adams, 1983; Schaefer, 1991). A few examples from the past on how policies influence families helps to highlight this relationship. Childhood immunization against life-threatening diseases, which is dependent in large part on public support, tends to respond to the value placed on it by policymakers. This has happened through the availability of financial and human resources being made available to address the immunization problem. When funding for immunization is reduced, an increase in particular childhood diseases is observed; likewise, when funding and related support is increased, a decrease in these disease is noticed (Edelman, 1987). Education also plays a key role; with public media alerts and local educational efforts, the problem has been successfully addressed (Bumpers & Carter, 1992). Life-threatening diseases not only negatively influence the family's well-being, but they also have a detrimental effect on society's social and economic fabric (Edelman, 1987).

Another example with particular importance to the early childhood years is the public's involvement in promoting quality child care. Where public policy (examples can be seen at local, state, and federal levels) promotes adequate licensing standards, supports the development of quality programs, and advocates for family-centered child care systems, the results have been encouraging (Edelman, 1987). In contrast, where the efforts have been lacking or of a minimal nature, the results have been less than adequate. Poorly trained staff, unsafe physical facilities, programs deficient in needed learning resources, and family-school conflicts, promote degrading child care arrangements (Pence, 1988).

While the relationship between public policy and family-school dynamics is indeed evolutionary, *it is evident that policymakers need to be involved in promoting the exploration of strategies that hold promise for strengthening these areas of human development and learning*. This is particularly the case with support strategies that promote in parents and teachers a stronger sense of control over their lives. They need support in finding the time, the skills, and the resources for shaping partnerships that can create quality relationships and environments for children and themselves (Edelman, 1992). The challenge of negotiating the family's developmental needs within a complex society such as ours, requires a high level of support and information so that parents and teachers can concentrate on nurturing children toward success. Areas that have emerged as needing critical public attention: health care, child care, safety, literacy, economic resources and skills, family development time and skills, and community involvement in children's issues (Boyer, 1991). A "hands-off" policy in the public domain in regard to these family-school issues is and has been an inhibiting if not degrading influence on the lives of children, parents, and teachers. Just as our nation engages in economic, military, and physical infrastructure planning, so it must also engage in the ongoing study and planning of improving the family-school infrastructure (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Pence, 1988; Popenoe, 1988; Schorr & Schorr, 1988).

An involved citizenry can influence policymakers to consider ways to strengthen families and schools. Parents and teachers need to engage in advocacy roles that promote healthy change in communities; taking needed action to influence stronger community involvement in the health and well-being of children and families (Haskins & Adams, 1983). This calls for the continuing presence of parents and teachers on school boards, city councils, and through service on various boards and policy-making groups. In addition, parent-teacher involvement in church, business, civic, and other policy-influencing groups should become part of a system for bringing about an intimate covenant that fosters a new, stronger, and healthier family-school-community environment (Blazer, 1989; Davies, 1991; Swick & Duff, 1979).

Specific needs and issues that require immediate attention include the development and accessing of prenatal and early family health care, community-wide parent education, community-centered family counseling, preventive early childhood care and education, family-friendly workplaces, and inviting and effective schools and community resource centers (Swick, 1991). Preventive health care is one of the most effective ways to strengthen families. Citizens must be encouraged to demand top quality health care, education, and immunization services during the earliest years of life.

Likewise, it is now known that families need time to shape their identity and to nurture each other toward positive and productive living. This need (clearly evidenced in the documented decline in the time spent by parents with their children) calls for major shifts in how families are allowed to function and indeed in how they spend time together. It is certainly an educational process, and yet it is also a support issue: parents must have "time and resources" to engage in meaningful family-building activities at the outset of the family's journey (Blazer, 1989). It is both a quality and quantity issue that is interrelated with all of our social values (Galinsky, 1987, 1990). Not only are practices such as extended maternity/paternity leave and flexi-scheduling needed, but also there is a need to correlate these practices with family education on the value and role of attachment and nurturing-building rituals in the family's development. How time is spent together is just as important as what time is spent together. Parent and family education programs need to utilize parent-centered strategies such as networking, peer helping, and continuing discussion-groups as ways of engaging families in thinking and planning for positive family-building (Cowan & Cowan, 1991; Powell, 1989). It is also essential to involve the community in efforts to realize the significance of early attachment time and experiences within the family.

The challenges families face require the use of both preventive and problem-solving mental health resources. In this regard, the current mental health system in our society needs major refocusing, it is currently structured to meet mostly rehabilitative needs—not preventive. Stress in areas such as family-workplace conflicts, family distress over job changes, environmental stressors (such as high crime), and the new parenting skills needed for functioning in our very complex society, require more emphasis on mental health empowerment skills (Skolnick, 1991).

Another critical issue is that of reframing child care into a quality system that is focused on the comprehensive needs of young families with preschool-aged children. These centers of caring and learning must be staffed by capable and sensitive people and must be organized around the needs of the total family. They need to reach beyond being "warehouses" to become integral parts of a family-community covenant that includes parent education, parent presence in the classrooms, family support practices, collaboration with business and industry, and the use of intergenerational resource people (Galinsky, 1990; Hamburg, 1992; Lazar & Darlington, 1982). These centers should be the most nurturing and caring places in the society beyond the family's own center of nurturance.

Family-supportive workplaces and safe and nurturing communities function like a hidden but powerful web of security and meaning for families and schools. The question can be asked: How much of children's mental health problems are related to the stress present in communities that emanate from crime, noise pollution, poverty, illiteracy, and other antihuman practices? Families and schools need the "web of support" that emerges from a totally involved community (Sagan, 1987). Cold and unresponsive environments are the seedbed of apathy, cynicism, and distrust. Research suggests, for example, that workplace supports such as child care, family sick leave, adequate benefit packages, enrichment programs, and other helpful practices not only strengthen families but also improve the workplace (Galinsky, 1990; Hewlett, 1991). Similar outcomes are found in family-oriented communities where safety, recreational, educational, and health resources are integrated with the family and school's efforts. This is a clear advocacy need that Sagan (1987, p. 202) places within the total societal context:

> The concept of health must be broadened beyond the individual to include the entire social network on which the health of the individual depends; a healthy nation is more than a collection of healthy individuals.

Until all aspects of health are interrelated with the family-community system, we will continue to confront a fragmented and poorly functioning arrangement. School failure, antisocial behavior, and a plethora of other social ills are very much connected to poor health (Sagan, 1987).

Schools also need a public policy system that promotes their ability to function as centers of family learning. Resources are needed (both human and financial) to support school practices that encourage a family involvement program. Funding, for example, should be directed toward more collaborative community-school preschool, parent oriented programs, parent-family education and support efforts, expanded child development projects, adult literacy efforts, extended day and summer enrichment projects, school-business cooperatives, more parental involvement in classrooms and on decision-making teams, and on better integration of school-community services (Swick, 1991). *Three dimensions of this refocusing process need special attention:* reorganization of how schools function, school-family partnership training, and realignment of community resources that critically influence family and school processes (Comer, 1986; Davies, 1991; Swick, 1991). Each of these dimensions will require considerable exploration, the purpose here is to clarify the needed direction for shaping public policy.

While school restructuring has gained many vocal adherents, few people have given serious thought to the core of this vital process: *organizing the school so that a viable family-school relationship can be attained* (Epstein, 1984; Gardner, 1982; Rich, 1987). Various roadblocks presently exist in schools that tend to inhibit the full development of meaningful family-school relationships: time, physical structure, staff organization, training, outmoded philosophical premises, isolation of staff from each other and from parents, lack of resources, and other factors (Lightfoot, 1978; Morrison, 1978; Rich, 1987; Swick, 1992). For example, the "classroom bound" mentality of focusing on children's needs in isolation from the family along with limited teacher planning time, discourage the development of parent-teacher partnerships. Another barrier is the lack of resources. Add to this the very minimal training teachers receive that is truly pertinent to parental and family involvement.

Several practices have proven effective, when properly supported, with regard to forming meaningful teacher-parent relationships. For example, the use of "classroom learning teams" (comprised of teachers, paraprofessionals, and parents) have enriched many classrooms (Swick, 1992). There are other useful strategies: organizing regular teacher-parent planning sessions, involvement of teachers in continuous training, schoolwide assessment of the environment for promoting family-school relationships, leadership training for parents and teachers on how to work effectively with each other, and community recognition of innovative parent involvement practices (Comer & Haynes, 1991). The ultimate goal must be to shape a school environment where families are intimate and fully accepted partners in the education of their children. This will only happen as we engage citizens in helping to foster this needed system through concrete funding and participation.

Whatever structural changes are pursued in schools (and indeed encouraged in families as they develop relationships with schools), *teachers and parents need training on how to work with each other in partnership endeavors.* Integral to this training is a focus on teacher skills such as: philosophy, parent-family life skills, parent involvement, communication and teaming, and school-family relationship processes (Swick, 1991, 1992). Ultimately, this effort should be extended to include teachers and parents in joint learning experiences that focus on issues and skills for developing partnerships. This process should promote a better understanding of the roles and relationships that need to be supported and practiced within effective parent-teacher relationships. Further, it should lead to the integration of teaming as a way of promoting children's success within the family and the school (Ascher, 1988; Davies, 1991; Rich, 1987).

Public policy efforts need to be reoriented toward work and family policies (and school policies) that support a more intimate and functional relationship between families and schools. Leave time for parents to participate in conferences, help out in their children's classrooms, and to serve on school improvement councils is one approach. The important issue is that we must create a societal belief system that expects and supports parent involvement in more sustained ways (Powell, 1989; Swick, 1991). Providing teachers with time to plan and work with parents is another way of setting policy that promotes this partnership approach. Involving citizens and business/industrial staff in resource and support roles is yet another dimension. Informal supports within kin and neighborhood social networks may well be the foundation upon which these other relationships are based. Ultimately, successful families and schools are the outcome of communities where they are valued and supported.

Part Five

COMMUNICATING WITH PARENTS AND FAMILIES

Communication is interrelated with every facet of family-school relationships. Whether the process involves parents and teachers in educational activities, planning efforts, or interacting in conferences, the vital ingredient is communication. While this important element in parent-teacher and family-school interactions is universally recognized, it is rarely given the kind of attention needed. Too often, professionals and parents assume that "communication" is so natural that they need only to talk and listen. It is this attitude that has detracted from the development of meaningful parent-professional relationships.

Communication is a process that is learned! It is acquired, like other learning experiences, through interactions with others, modeling the processes of significant others, and through direct educational activities. In effect, communication is a form of "shared learning". It requires intentional listening, thoughtful planning, and continual renewal of ways of relating information, ideas, and feelings to others (Colleta, 1977). **Chapter Seventeen** focuses on communication as a shared learning process. Recognizing that communication opens many avenues to growth, this chapter examines guidelines, communication behaviors, the learning nature of the communication process, and the nature of communication within different contexts. It emphasizes that *communication is a complex process that involves values, beliefs, and actions that emanate from our cultural orientation.* These elements of our identity must be considered in the process of developing communication behaviors that are effective. The chapter also engages the reader in examining the orientation of others, the way they feel and think. Communication is more than a two-way dialogue, it involves "third parties" in the form of people we live with, our surrounding environment, and the many interactions we have with others.

Chapter Eighteen focuses on the techniques, strategies, and styles of communication that directly relate to the teacher-parent relationship. The skills of communicating within the teacher-parent relationship are explicated and discussed. Particular attention is given to the various strategies that teachers and parents engage in communication, with the emphasis on how to use these modes in positive and productive ways. Home visits, conferences, open house programs, newsletters, telecommunications, home learning, parent advisory and decision making groups, and other strategies are explored. In addition, the styles of communication that people use in relating to each other are examined. The way that these styles influence our dialogue are discussed. Ideas and suggestions on how to best relate to different styles are also explored. Examples of teacher-parent communication activities are described and integrated into the presentation. The realization that teacher-parent communication is an intentional, proactive process is the theme of this chapter.

Parent-teacher and family-school communication inevitably brings tensions related to differences in viewpoints, role confusion, cultural misunderstandings, and related problems. **Chapter Nineteen** explores "conflict and confrontation" as opportunities for learning within the context of the family-school relationship. A major premise presented in this chapter is that preventive communication planning, training, and teamwork can create a positive climate for building trusting relationships between parents and teachers. Yet even within the most harmonious relationships, conflicts are certain to occur. These tensions need to be seen as "points of learning" where parents and teachers can learn from each other through sharing ideas, listening carefully to the views of others, and by spending productive time in planning together. Specific strategies and perspectives on how to deal with conflicts in proactive ways are shared. The theme of the chapter is on using preventive techniques to avoid crises in the communication effort, and on utilizing a problem solving approach when conflicts do occur.

Chapter Seventeen

COMMUNICATION: A PROCESS FOR SHARED LEARNING

Everything we do in life relates to the process of communication. Parent-teacher relationships have their origins within a communicative context. Parents shape their perceptions of schools and teachers through the many communicative interactions they have with teachers, principals, and other school staff. Likewise, teacher perceptions of parents evolve from their images of parents gained through some form of communication (Galinsky, 1988). The communication process is built upon the premise that people want to convey their ideas and feelings with others and are willing and able to engage in a form of shared learning (Swick, 1991). This premise suggests that parents and teachers should want to be the most effective communicators in the society. *Communication, then, is a process by which people formulate their plans for either acting in concert toward common goals, achieving individual aspirations, or attempting to modify some aspect of their shared concerns* (Colleta, 1977).

The significance of the communication process is conveyed by Satir (1988, p. 51)

> Once a human being arrives on this earth, *communication is the largest single factor determining what kinds of relationships she or he makes with others and what happens to each in the world.* How we manage survival, how we develop intimacy, how productive we are, how we make sense, how we connect with our divinity—all depend on our communication skills.

For all of us, communication is how we develop our self image. It is within our early "family experiences" that we initially learn a style of communication. The way we are treated, the modeling we observe in our parents and other adults, and the kinds of experiences we have in our interactions with others, are powerful influences in the shaping of our communication behaviors. The beauty of this process is that we can, through intentional learning change improve our communication skills. We bring all of the following elements into the process of communication (Satir, 1988, p. 52).

Elements We Bring to the Communication Process

- We bring our bodies
- We bring our values
- We bring our expectations
- We bring our sense organs
- We bring our ability to talk
- We bring our brains

Through the use of our senses, the internalization of values, our thinking habits, our style of talking and listening, and our modes of interacting with others, we develop our schema for being who we are and our patterns for relating to others.

Both our verbal and nonverbal behaviors combine to become our "content" and "process" for communication. When this content and process are primarily degrading, negative, and threatening, our self becomes fragile. We become insecure, fearful, very distrusting, and basically unable to authentically interact with others in meaningful ways. Positive messages from others, their valuing of our integrity and uniqueness, and supportiveness toward us, promote a more positive self portrait (Satir, 1988).

To be effective communicators our "self image pot" needs to be full. Satir (1988, p. 22) describes this need for a positive self image effectively.

> Integrity, honesty, responsibility, compassion, love, and competence, all flow easily from people whose self-esteem is high. We feel that we matter, that the world is a better place because we are here. We have faith in our own competence. We are able to ask others for help, yet we believe we can make our own decisions and are, in the end, our own best resources. Appreciating our own worth, we are ready to see and respect the worth of others. We radiate trust and hope.

Teachers and parents need to see their communicative relationship in a partnership manner. This calls for realizing the importance of each other's self-esteem and the need for supporting in each other the nurturance of high self-esteem. Proactive parent-teacher communication begins with some basic principles (Swick, 1991).

- Each person recognizes the need for involving each other in arriving at decisions that effect them and the children.

- The development of "high regard" for each other's integrity and roles as advocates and models for children is also recognized.

- Each person works toward having an empathetic and supportive attitude toward the other.

- As a team, parent and teacher seek the most productive system for arriving at roles and means by which to achieve a true partnership.

- Each person is sensitive to the cultural, personal, and individual values of the other.

Communication As Key To Parent-Child-Teacher Relationships

The most effective way to learn about good communication is to observe role models who put the skills of communication to work on a daily basis. Swick (1984) notes that each of us observes people we view as "good communicators." They provide examples of how communication can be a key to building viable parent-child-teacher relationships. He (Swick, 1984, p. 175) discusses the attributes of one such role model.

> "Mrs. Speltry is able to get us together, she has that talent!" It is Mrs. Speltry's entire style of relating to people that enables her to communicate with them. She makes herself available to people by being there whenever the need arises. When she is with people they sense her concern and know she will listen and then act in the best interests of everyone. People know they can trust Mrs. Speltry as she does not betray people by breaking their confidential relationship with her. She is known as a person who looks for the positive aspect of any situation no matter how serious it may be. How did people come to believe in Mrs. Speltry? They saw their children grow and learn under her guidance. "She treats each child in a special way, says one parent. "I used to feel uncomfortable around teachers until I met Mrs. Speltry," says another parent.

While not everyone has the inviting way of reaching parents and children that Mrs. Speltry did, each person can nurture in themselves the attributes she modeled: trust, warmth, responsiveness, active listening, concern for others, and other important relationship-building skills. Every teacher and parent can search for the best in the children they care for. Forming effective parent-child-teacher relationships takes time and much effort on the part of everyone involved. Communication is the key in this important process. Effective communicators understand that initial parent contacts provide an opportunity for laying the foundation for beginning a trusting and meaningful relationship with others. Continuing interactions among children, parents, and teachers, when planned with a positive perspective, add strength to the overall communication environment. Helping children feel comfortable in the classroom environment, taking time to listen to the everyday concerns of parents, and planning regular and supportive interactions with parents are the kinds of skills and behaviors teachers need to integrate into their professional lives (Swick 1984).

The lack of clear, positive, and responsive communication is a major source of tension among parents, children, and teachers. Herrera & Wooden (1988) describe a case study in which parent and teacher end up in a serious conflict related to the child's language experiences at school (revolving around the school's implementation of a bilingual education program). The conflict, as they describe it, was due mainly to poor communication—including unclear messages, lack of responsiveness to the parent's concerns, and weak problem solving skills. The school did not include the parent in the initial planning of the child's experiences nor take into account the parental perspective. Further, the information shared with the parent was so technical that the parent did not really understand the meaning of the material. Of utmost importance, the school failed to account for cultural values present in the home. All of these factors combine to make up the communication environment. Communication is more than simply conveying to another person what you plan to do. It involves every facet (verbal, nonverbal, environmental, cultural) of the family-school relationship (Satir, 1988).

Research confirms that continuing, positive, and responsive communication between parents and teachers has a positive influence on children's development and learning (Swick, 1991). For example, studies of exemplary early childhood programs indicate that children of involved parents (parents who are in continuous communication with the school) perform better during their early years and appear to internalize prosocial behaviors that serve them throughout their lives (Lazar, 1976; Rich, 1987). School personnel also report that parental involvement increases children's effectiveness in several ways: regular school attendance, completion of school assignments, positive attitudes toward teachers and toward learning, and consistently high achievement (Sinclair, 1980; Swick, 1991).

The beginning of positive communication behaviors is in the parent-child relationship as it emerges within the family. In effect, our training arena for developing the needed skills for having productive relationships with people is the family (Satir, 1988). It appears that the security, warmth, and harmony that emerges in parent-child relationships serve to support in parents and in children involvement patterns that are likely to become habits that are used throughout the life span. For example, Schaefer (1985) found that mothers who were highly involved with their infants were also very involved in the children's lives when they were in kindergarten. The bonds formed early in infancy—and early in the parent's development—appear to be the partnership behaviors that are later extended to school and community involvement (Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Our communication pattern, while not encased in our early experiences, is certainly heavily guided by these interactions (Satir, 1988).

Eight communication processes that are used throughout the life span and have their foundation in the early childhood years, particularly as they evolve within family and family-school experiences are: trust development, role flexibility, help-exchange behaviors, responsive listening, individuation, group-functioning skills, nurturance, and problem solving (Swick, 1987).

Trust is the foundation upon which all significant relationships are developed (Erikson, 1982). Communication emanates from the level of trust individuals have in each other. Sensitive and enduring communication is based on trusting relationships. Our first experiences with trust (and communication) are embedded in the parent-child relationship. Satir (1988, p. 18) notes:

> Everyone who holds a position of power or influence in the world was once an infant. How he or she uses power of influence depends largely on what the person learned in the family while growing up.

She goes on to say (p. 42)

> I often fantasize what would happen if, after tonight's sleep, everyone woke up with high self-esteem. I think our world would be very different. People would be able to treat themselves and each other with love, with kindness, and with reality.

All meaningful communication between and among parents, children, and teachers is based on trust.

Role flexibility is essential to the viability of relationships. Inclusive of this skill, for example, is the ability to nurture as well as to be nurtured; to lead as well as to follow; to be supportive as well as to receive support (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). For the most part it is through observing competent adults that we learn about role flexibility. Seeing supportive interactions within the family, having open and healthy relationships with our parents, and engaging in diverse role situations throughout our early years provide a "map" for us to use in shaping this skill in ourselves. The essence of role flexibility is the "perspective taking skills" that emerge in our communication with others.

Help-exchange is common to all healthy relationships (Rohner, 1986); this process is what makes meaningful communication possible. Parents, children, and teachers who acquire a reputation of being effective helpers have a foundation of what can be called a spiritual sense of help-exchange. Swick (1991, p. 26) discusses the intricacies and dynamics of this process as it emerges early in life.

> A truly authentic relationship does not view help-exchange as bartering but rather as the means by which both individual and group needs are sustained in a responsive manner. In this sense, the physical help exchanged in relationships is simply a surface indicator of a deeper spiritual exchange that speaks of a reciprocal commitment of the individuals to each other's growth and well-being. For example, the father who changes his schedule to be more available to the family is indeed modeling the essence of the real meaning of help-exchange.

Responsive listening is the feedback process that enables communication to gain substance. It is one vital way we show that we care. It too begins early in life! The beauty of parent-child caring scenes is in the nonverbal yet intimate responsiveness of a group of people to the mutual well-being of each person. It is through the many family experiences where individuals change and respond to each others' growth needs that children and parents acquire true listening skills. Many families wisely set aside times to promote this listening skill, thus assuring that their relationships are not impeded by the spiritual void that can emerge when no one is listening (Blazer, 1989). Listening is more than a cognitive act, it is a total experience involving body, mind, and soul. This is why it is so important that we use our bodies (touch, eye contact, gestures), our minds (thoughts, viewpoints, problem solving ideas), and our souls (caring, intimacy, conscience) in the listening process.

What makes communication meaningful to each of us? It is the process of ***individuation*** (Fraiberg, 1987). Hopefully, with the process of growth comes a more sophisticated individual, a person who is increasingly self-differentiated in a positive sense (Kotre & Hall, 1990). This process gains in momentum when, in the early years of life, children experience a supportive and enriching relationship with their parents. In supportive families, for example, two-year-olds begin to individuate and take on personality traits that define them as unique and distinct persons within the family. Strong, positive, and consistent relationships require that the participants have this sense of individuation. Mutuality is impossible without the power that comes from healthy individuation (Erikson, 1982). Parents, children, and teachers must have this strong sense of self (in the proactive and nurturing manner), as Satir (1988, p. 33) explains:

> Good human relations and appropriate and loving behavior stem from persons who have strong feelings of self-worth. Simply stated, persons

> who love and value themselves are able to love and value others and treat reality appropriately. Having a strong sense of self-worth is the way to become more fully human, to having health and happiness, gaining and maintaining satisfying relationships, and being appropriate, effective, and responsible.

Knowing how to use ***group functioning skills*** provides us with the needed security for communicating in meaningful ways (Swick, 1984). Part of this security comes through learning the meaning of "give and take" skills that are acquired early in our lives. This process-skill is best learned within the confines of small, intimate settings such as the family. It engages us in learning the mutuality of supportiveness, the need for sharing and learning with others. All of the communication skills of listening, problem solving, responding, engaging, and help-exchange are used in the group functioning process. This skill, like other communication skills, is modeled and internalized within the natural social relationships that evolve in healthy family settings and then extended in school and communities where supportiveness is valued (Satir, 1988).

Two communication skills that sustain and enrich human relationships are ***nurturance*** and ***problem solving,*** both of which have their origins in the family's early development (Bettelheim, 1987). Research has shown that *nurturance* (providing self and others with support, a sense of uniqueness, and resources) is the continuing energy source for all human relationships, especially relationships that require intensive and sustaining involvement such as parenting and teaching (Galinsky, 1988). Nurturance is the forgotten foundation of communication renewal. For example, family researchers note that negative recursive behaviors are most often the result of a lack of family nurturing patterns. We begin to take each other for granted and become passive in our communication actions—which promotes negative outcomes (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). In healthy relationships, people take the time necessary for nurturing each other, using caring rituals that communicate how special the person is to the family or to other social groups.

Problem solving might be called the "action arm" of the communication process. It is where we take action to refine, change, or reshape particular behaviors or situations to enhance or empower ourselves and others (Swick, 1991). Family problem solving is mostly a process of identification, observation, articulation, planning, and carrying out new or refined behaviors. It is an accommodation and assimilation process where individuals and groups adapt to their changing environment. Satir (1988) talks about the "open system" in which problem solving best occurs. She describes the open system attributes that promote problem solving: high individual self-esteem, direct and growth-producing communication, a nurturing and leveling style of interacting, overt and flexible rules, and a mutual commitment to each other. Clearly, children, parents, and teachers need to have an open arrangement where their ideas and feelings have value and have the potential of influencing each other in honest and forthright ways.

Some Helpful Communication Suggestions

Communication is in every action teachers and caregivers carry out in their work. Research has identified some key guidelines we can use to strengthen our relationship-building skills. Remember, effective communication begins with each of us as we attempt to relate to others. Swick, Hobson, & Duff (1981, pp. 72-74) note the following questions as one way of checking how effective we are in communicating with others.

- Do I express myself clearly and in a nonthreatening manner?
- When communicating with others do I allow time for others to express their concerns?
- Am I a good listener? Do I actively respond to the inquiries of others or am I closed to new ideas?
- In communicating with me do others feel comfortable with me?
- Do I prepare myself for intentional communication with others or do I take a reactive, passive stance most of the time?
- When communicating with others do I focus on strengths and deal with weaknesses in a positive fashion?
- Am I "personal" in my contacts with others such as using their name and relating to their personal concerns?
- When critiquing another's behavior or work do I offer suggestions on how he or she can improve?
- Do I avoid stereotyping people and deal with them in an individual way?
- Have I refined my communication skills by examining materials on the topic and/or attending programs related to communicating effectively with parents?

While each of us must recognize our communication weaknesses, the above questions should also serve to help us focus on how we can be more effective in working with others. As we communicate with each other we need to recognize that our environment also influences our interactions. Pleasant and inviting environments seem to promote strong parent, child, and teacher communication arrangements. For example, a classroom with children's work on display, a place for parents to share information, and a psychological sense of security and exploration invites parent involvement in the most distinct way possible (Swick, 1984). Our nonverbal behavior speaks louder than our words. What we do with children, parents, and ourselves, communicates our true feelings about life. Eye contact, body language, and other nonverbal actions give us away; they tell where we are at in terms of our sincerity (Hall, 1959). When we are not looking at the person we are involved with or are trying to do other things while talking with them, we are giving them a message that their concerns or ideas are not that important—at least at that point in time. Effective communicators carry out "self-study" on their communication environment and work to improve it.

Communication Behaviors that Empower

What happens in parent-child and parent-child-teacher relationships (or does not happen) that so often causes deterioration in their communication? In most cases it is the use of inappropriate and/or degrading communication behaviors. It is more than just the surface communication going on between us and others, it is what goes on beneath the surface too! It is what each person is feeling about themselves, what they feel comfortable with sharing, and how they share their feelings. *Within family relationships,* Satir (1988, Chapter 7) describes four communication patterns that actually degrade human relationships: placating, blaming, computing, and distracting.

The placater talks in ingratiating ways, trying to please—never disagreeing, no matter what. This is a "yes person" who talks as though he or she could do nothing for himself or herself.

The blamer is a fault-finder, a dictator and a boss, always acting superior. The person seems to be saying "if it weren't for you, everything would be all right." Blamers are not really interested in finding solutions to problems, rather they are self-engaged in showing their power.

The computer communicator is the cognitive and intellectual perfectionist. No feelings, no recognition of human error, and little compassion is evidenced in their relationships with others. They tend to be detached, more like a dictionary than a human being.

The distracter avoids reality, trying to continue with life as if nothing has happened. They give others the feeling of confusion. There is no rhyme or reason to their communication behaviors.

Satir (1988) notes that these communication patterns degrade people and fail to enhance the relationships among people. It is in the *leveling pattern of communication* that we empower each other. She (Satir, 1988, p. 93) describes this empowering communication approach:

> There is another response that I have called *leveling* or *flowing*. In this response all parts of the message are going in the same direction: the voice's words match the facial expression, body position, and voice tone. Relationships are easy, free, and honest, and people feel few threats to self-esteem. This response relieves any need to placate, blame, retreat into a computer, or be in perpetual motion.

Congruence, truth, wholeness, integration, aliveness, and an openness to others' feelings and ideas are descriptors that best represent *leveling* (Satir, 1988).

Swick (1984) discusses empowering communication behaviors in relation to *teacher-parent contexts*. Four communication behaviors hold the potential to empower human relationships. They influence parent-child, teacher-child, and parent-teacher relationships in many ways. They are: approachability, sensitivity, flexibility, and dependability.

The approachable person is an individual with whom people feel comfortable. The following is an example of an approachable teacher interacting with a parent in a conference.

Mr. Hall:	Hi, Mrs. Palmer! How are you today? I really appreciate your taking time to visit with me. Would you like a cup of coffee?
Mrs. Palmer:	Yes, thank you. The classroom looks so nice. Oh, may I have a doughnut too?
Mr. Hall:	Yes, please have one and I want to show you the bulletin board that Jimmy helped to make.
Mrs. Palmer:	The children made this? It is real nice!

In an inviting manner, Mr. Hall helps Mrs. Palmer relax, see the environment in a pleasant manner, and become comfortable with him as the teacher. By having refreshments available and the children's work on display, Mr. Hall exhibited a genuine and positive concern for the children and their parents. An inviting setting (where people can approach each other comfortably) provides the basis for extended and meaningful communication between parents and teachers (Purkey & Novak, 1984).

Sensitivity is at the heart of all communication. The sensitive person communicates a desire to understand the other person in positive ways, both in their verbal and nonverbal behaviors. We use the case of Mr. Hall again to highlight this empowering behavior.

Mr. Hall: Mrs. Palmer I want to tell you how delighted I am to have Jimmy in the class, he shares so well with the other children!

Mrs. Palmer: That's good to hear. He hasn't been sleeping well lately. How is he doing in his school work?

Mr. Hall: Nothing to be alarmed about, but he is having some difficulty in math and reading, but is doing well in social studies. I have been concerned that he seems withdrawn lately and doesn't seem to care about school like he did earlier in the school year. Is it something I might have done?

Mrs. Palmer: No, I don't think it is anything you have done. Jimmy really likes you. I should share with you that Mr. Palmer and I recently separated and it has been difficult for all of us.

This approach to the conference by Mr. Hall indicates that he is concerned about Jimmy and the family in a constructive fashion. The fact that Mr. Hall points out positive aspects of Jimmy's behavior and is willing to entertain the possibility that he might have been a source of tension for Jimmy indicates to Mrs. Palmer that she is dealing with a sensitive person. It is likely that such sensitivity influenced Mrs. Palmer to share the family's difficulty with Mr.

Hall. She can see that she is dealing with a compassionate and interested teacher in Mr. Hall. His knowledge of Jimmy (shared through his observations of Jimmy's change in behavior from the early part of the school year) and his genuine concern for the child's success have provided a common foundation for further work between teacher, child, and parent.

Flexibility provides the needed "space" and security for effective communication. Parents, children, and teachers, like all human beings, want to have options so they can find the needed space, resources, and support to grow, change, and guide themselves toward constructive outcomes. Flexible attitudes and behaviors need to evolve within relationships to support this process. Teachers can take the lead by modeling flexibility in their communication with parents and children. The following is a telephone conversation where a teacher is attempting to open up communication with a parent who has a concern about the curriculum.

Mrs. Juniper: Mrs. Edwards, I'm sorry to hear you're upset. I went through the colors at the beginning of the year and none of the children knew them. But I must admit the children were still getting used to school and maybe many of them did know their colors. I'm glad you called! Why don't you stop by some afternoon or I'll be happy to visit you as I really do want to make sure I am doing my best for Bob and all of the children.

Mrs. Edwards: Why thank you, I certainly will visit and I didn't mean to sound so upset. I was just, well a little concerned about Bob.

Mrs. Juniper's response to this inquiry about the curriculum shows a desire to collaboratively look at the situation, consider alternatives, and to find a meaningful solution. This flexibility indicates an openness to the ideas of parents and to their concerns.

Dependability is the bridge between parents and teachers as they develop long term, trusting relationships (Swick, 1984). Mrs. Juniper's response to Mrs. Edwards' inquiry about the curriculum shows a desire to collaboratively look at the situation, consider alternatives, and to find a meaningful solution. This flexibility indicates an openness to the ideas of parents and to their concerns. Teachers who communicate that they can be counted on usually have productive relationships with parents and children. Mrs. Reynolds is a good example of a dependable teacher. Rene's mother called her to ask if she could keep an eye on Rene, things have been hectic at home since her grandmother took sick. "Sure, I'll be glad to keep track of how she relates to things—to see if there is any change in her behavior. Let's keep in touch," Mrs. Reynolds said. Indeed she followed through on her promise and called Rene's mother a week later. "Rene seems fine," she said. "We can keep in touch with each other on this until things settle down. Hopefully, grandma will be feeling better soon."

In all aspects of parent involvement *communication is the key to bringing about positive family-school relationships.* Sensitive, flexible, approachable, and dependable teachers are usually effective with parents because they are open to the parental perspective, desire parent involvement and want to work with parents to improve the educational process.

Nonverbal Actions Empower Too!

Daniel Stern (1977) notes that initial mother-infant communications are nonverbal. Through the nonverbal means of touch, eye contact, and other body movement, a foundation is shaped for verbal communication. The mother is the primary organizer of the environment (although once initiated the communication is reciprocal if so nurtured) in which this interaction takes place. Of course, the mother is highly influenced by her communication environment, particularly the father and/or other significant adult figures. When of a positive nature, this nonverbal communication empowers mother and child to form a *silent rhythm* in their interactions. In other cases, as Stern notes, mother and infant fail to thrive because they both lack the needed environmental resources to shape this process. We learn much of our nonverbal interaction patterns during this early period of life. Hopefully, we learn how to use our environment, our "nonverbal selves", and our relationships with others, to empower and strengthen self and others. Satir (1988, p. 37) explains how this process works during the very early years of life.

> Each of our "fountains" is in play even in infancy. The psychological reservoir from which an infant draws self-esteem is the outcome of all the actions, reactions, and interactions between and among the persons who care for that infant.

It is critical that parents and other adults are sensitive to how they touch the infant, relate to the child's world in their nonverbal actions, and model for children various nonverbal actions.

As we become adults, a similar process is at work in our relationships with each other. Parent-teacher relationships are strongly influenced by this "silent world" of nonverbal communication. The "silent world" of the teacher or parent may tell more than their spoken messages. Yet the nonverbal or silent communication aspect of relationship building has been largely neglected in the education of human service professionals. Research indicates that teacher expectations of others (particularly parents) are formed as a result of many interactive forces, of which a large number are nonverbal (Hall, 1959). For example, we tend to value those people we see as capable and sincere while we interact less with those people we view as deficient in human capacities. Our awareness of nonverbal communication skills can improve our ability to use the "silent world of interaction" for empowering relationships with parents and children.

There are several components to our nonverbal communication world. Consider, for example, the impact of the *physical environment* on parent-teacher communication. A cluttered or dismal room tends to inhibit the free flow of communication. Overcrowding influences human behavior toward passive and often negative modes while disorder seems to interfere with normal human interactions. A pleasant, well organized and physically attractive environment provides a setting where parent-teacher communication can take place in a productive manner. Lawler (1991) notes that teachers should arrange the environment:

- for a relaxed, pleasant interchange between parents and teacher.
- so that parents will feel comfortable and open to discussion.
- in a way that invites parents to continue communication over the length of the school year.

The displaying of children's work, sharing class projects, having a special place for parents, and organizing a setting that says "you are welcomed and you are important" are critical elements of this physical environment. Indeed, the appeal and "message" conveyed through the physical arrangement often communicates more than anything else in the parent-teacher relationship (Swick, 1991).

A part of this physical influence is the *teacher's physical appearance* (Swick, 1984). It is an important silent but powerful factor in the communication process. A unkempt teacher gives signals of disorder and may cause the parent to focus on their personal appearance more than on what is said during their communication. One's appearance is often equated with effectiveness. The physical and psychological environment of the classroom and school and the appearance of the teacher set the stage for positive or negative parent-teacher interactions.

An important part of our interaction with parents is *conveyed through our eyes and physical gestures.* Our eyes, says William Purkey, (1978) give us away. Sincerity, interest and "human contact" are conveyed through the eyes. I can be speaking and yet doing so rather mechanically, but my lack of interest will show through my visual expression. Eye contact is essential for conveying your spoken message as well as for eliciting a meaningful response from the person you are trying to communicate with (Lawler, 1991). Pleasantness, empathy, and many other communication tones can be generated through eye contact. Facial expression also influences the rhythm of communication. For example, an expression of disgust by the teacher (conveyed totally through facial expression) may impede the normal flow of verbal interaction between parent and teacher. On the other hand, an expression of empathy can be a way of eliciting trust in the parent for the teacher's viewpoint. Gesturing can be used to strengthen a point of importance during discussion. Open arms, as an example, usually indicate an acceptance of other people's ideas. A clenched fist may be used to express firmness, anger or other emotional states. Teacher (and parent) control of gestures and other nonverbal communication techniques is critical to their establishing an effective framework for working with each other (Hall, 1984).

The physical space and distance between people signals what type of communication will be taking place. Cultural differences on the meaning of distance and space need to be accounted for in this dimension of communication. For example, the use of distance by leaders of governments in communicating with each other is mostly for formal purposes; however, some leaders like John Kennedy, would use close, intimate space and thus minimize the need for formal lines of communication. The use of objects like desks to keep parents at a distance will impede the process of communication. Using circular tables (and serving refreshments) can open up the lines of communication between teacher and parent (Lawler, 1991). Knowing about the cultural preferences of parents and children with regard to space and distance is vital to forming a communication environment that is suitable to their style of life. In some cultures, getting too close to the other person is considered rude. Yet in other cultures it is desired and considered a sign of acceptance (Hall, 1984).

The effective communicator follows through on the tasks to be completed. Our behavior speaks louder and more clearly than our words in our relationships with parents and teachers. By taking action on parent concerns and providing them with feedback on issues they have discussed with us, a sense of trust is nurtured and developed. Positive guidance, constructive suggestions and the proper handling of parent inquiries are nonverbal modes of communication that impact parents more than our verbal interactions with them (Swick & Duff, 1978).

Nonverbal actions establish the lasting "tone" for any communication relationship. Factors such as the physical environment, our body language, and our follow-through on agreed upon tasks convey a very critical message to parents and children. Our cultural sensitivity to parent and child communication styles is also very critical.

Communication is a Learning Process

The various parent, child, and teacher communication modes are carried out by people. People are human and make mistakes, get angry, sometimes over-react to situations, but above all are usually interested in growing as individuals (Swick, 1984). There is no perfect communication situation or technique. It is necessary to be aware of some of the things that can go wrong when parents and teachers are communicating and relating to each other. These situations also apply to parents and children. At the same time, we need to remind ourselves that only through our concerted efforts can we make the communication process better!

The Explosive Conference. Because parents and teachers are human and often labor under intense pressures they can become irrational. "Mr. Ryan, my child is not a discipline problem. You are just not a good teacher!" "Furthermore, I don't have to listen to this anymore, goodbye!" Such emotional outbursts by a parent or teacher do happen. Usually the person who behaves in such a manner has been building up to the emotional explosion. They may have had similar problems with the child and felt helpless in the predicament. When a parent or teacher explodes in this way it is best to let them express their feelings and then try to end the conference on a solution oriented basis. One might share with the parent the following: "I realize you are upset about the situation right now, let's try to meet when we can talk with each other in a more effective way." When parent and/or teacher have had time to calm down, the use of problem solving strategies can begin to bring the problem into better focus. It is important to let the parent know that you are aware of the stress related to the problem, understanding of their desire to solve the problem, and interested in working with them to come to a positive solution (Swick, 1984).

The Open House No One Attended. When teachers confront professional situations they must take action on but that may disrupt their relationships with parents and children, the consequences are often complex and frustrating for everyone. For example, in one school district the parents and teachers had spent considerable time planning for a "visit your school day" activity. However, the local teachers association found it necessary to call a city wide strike. The teachers, as a part of the strike, refused to conduct the open house program. Some parents, obviously disappointed, went ahead with the open house activity. Many other parents and citizens, upset about the strike, walked with signs protesting the strike. The program never materialized and even when the strike was over a tense and frustrating relationship existed. Such situations need not occur when continuing parent-teacher communication exists. But they do happen! What can be done when such situations occur? Preventive measures are the most effective. Keep your parents informed and be honest with them. Cultivate a supportive relationship and let parents know when particular conflicts are taking place. Reach out to parents when unsettling situations occur and let them know that you are indeed supportive of them and the children. Step forward and be the first to try to begin the healing process when the situation allows. Open and honest interaction with parents should prevent most such problems from happening and should provide a sound basis for dealing with problems when they do occur.

The Overly Involved Parent. There are parents, who in their eagerness to help, become involved in school situations in inappropriate ways. Mrs. Benton is such a parent. She is at the school everyday and constantly finding something wrong with the way things are managed. She is very helpful in what she does for the school but very damaging in what she says about the school staff. Some of the teachers are very angry and have complained to the principal. How do you tell someone they are overly involved? The best approach is to praise the individual for their accomplishments and to help them redirect their negative involvement toward more constructive outcomes. If this fails it will be necessary to have a clear and pointed discussion about the problem. Whatever approach is used try to be positive as usually this type of person is a meaningful ally, albeit misdirected in some of their efforts. Parent volunteer training can prevent most problems of this nature, but there are certain to be times when all of us get involved in ways that are not productive. Supportive but honest discussion related to our different roles in the school can help to preclude the issue or to solve it when necessary.

A Disastrous Group Conference. "I guess it can happen to any group but it was sure a disappointment to see it happen in our school." As principal of Elmwood Primary School, Mr. Dent had helped a group of parents and teachers organize a study and discussion group on ***Children and Discipline.*** It was a well organized group conference with every detail seemingly covered. No one ever imagined the possibility that a parent would use the group meeting as a chance to chastise everyone for being permissive parents and teachers. Mrs. Reynolds angered the group by her long, oratorical message on how everyone was too liberal and not disciplining their children. Several parents tried to react but she continued her emotional speech. Several parents left the meeting and others began arguing with Mrs. Reynolds. Finally, Mr. Dent closed the meeting amidst a very emotional atmosphere. "It was a real disaster," Mr. Dent explained. "I called every parent the next day and apologized for what happened and most of them were very understanding of the situation." This type of experience can happen to any group in any school. Mr. Dent handled it well and helped the parents to put the experience into perspective. The group has learned a valuable lesson and will be alerted to the possibility of parent-dominance the next time.

Involvement in any human relationship, particularly those that occur within the boundaries of the helping professions, requires a sense of humor. The best planned event can end in disaster. Most parents and teachers understand this and are willing to live with it. Do not allow one tragedy to destroy the parent-teacher relationship. Be the type of person and professional who is there to repair the damage and help others to renew their confidence in themselves and in the process of growing and learning together. The following are suggestions that research points to as positive means of dealing with parent-teacher communication problems (Rotter, Robinson, & Fey, 1987).

- The best way to avoid a problem is to *prevent it from happening*. Through planning and careful consideration of the needs of the participants, many problems can be avoided.

- When a problem does occur handle it in a positive way. *Avoid over-reacting to a problem situation* and encourage others to put the situation in a balanced perspective.

- When communication problems arise between parents and teachers it is not unusual for someone's feelings to be hurt. *Be the first to initiate the healing process* by apologizing or by seeking a better understanding with the person.

- If the problem happened because of poor planning (a missing piece of equipment, for example), *take note of the mistake* and integrate it into future efforts.

- When a parent tries to totally dominate group discussion, *clarify with them the need for listening* to everyone's perspective. One effective technique is to put "time limits" on each other when time is a problem.

Effective parent-teacher communication is based on the development of mutual trust among everyone involved. The use of effective communication behaviors and the organization of an inviting environment can strengthen parents and teachers in their efforts to build quality educational programs—for children and for themselves.

Chapter Eighteen

PARENT-TEACHER COMMUNICATION: STRATEGIES AND TECHNIQUES

Teachers and parents need an understanding of and skills in the enabling aspects of communication. Three aspects of this enabling process are: *strategies, techniques, and styles* (Bjorklund & Burger, 1987; Swick, 1984). Strategies need to be viewed within a three dimensional framework: beliefs, perspectives, and actions (Swick, 1991). Techniques are the ways parents and teachers can actualize their communication needs. While there are multiple techniques, the emphasis here is on those techniques that teachers and parents can use to strengthen their relationships. Communication styles provide the basic system by which people convey their sense of meaning of events and things to others. Clearly, we need to have an understanding of how others convey their meaning to us. This chapter explores the various aspects of strategies, techniques, and styles as related to empowering parents and teachers in their communicative relationships.

Communication Strategies: Beliefs, Perceptions, Actions

Beliefs about the communication process and about each other's role in that process shape the foundation upon which parents and teachers establish their relationships. Teachers, as professionals, need to examine their beliefs in at least three areas: self, self-other, and the communication process itself. As Gargiulo & Graves (1991) note, teachers' lack of faith in their own self-worth is often a major obstacle to their having positive relationships with parents. *Positive beliefs about self* as a person and as a teacher are the starting point of any communicative relationship. Teachers who are in touch with their own self-needs (health, personal growth, emotional nurturance) are usually more responsive, empathetic, and active in their relationships with parents (Swick, 1991).

Our beliefs about others evolve from our self-esteem and self-other experiences (Satir, 1988). The general beliefs teachers have about parents (their competency, strengths, and talents - as examples) set the stage for their communication with parents in the specific sense. For example, if teachers believe that parents are not knowledgeable and capable, they are likely to treat them in demeaning ways - often in subtle and yet very damaging modes

(Morgan, 1989). In marked contrast, early childhood professionals who believe in parents and respect their important roles involve and communicate with them more often (Swick & McKnight, 1989).

The professionals' beliefs about the nature, importance and role of the communication process itself is central to what they actually do in this domain. If the prevailing belief is that teachers control and direct the communication process, then the meaning of the parent-teacher-child relationship is diminished. Gelfer (1991, p. 164) notes that:

> If parents and teachers are going to establish partnerships that will be in the best interest of children, contact between parents and teachers should be a two-way process, from home to school and from school to home.

Perceptions of parents and teachers about each other and their role in the communication process has a powerful impact on the parent-teacher relationship. Both parents and teachers point to the need for mutual trust and respect in each other as a foundation for positive and supportive communication. Swick (1991, p. 130) articulates how this perception of each other influences the relationship process.

> Teachers and parents who exhibit attributes reflective of high regard are able to accept and use conflicts and mistakes as opportunities for growth.

Actions provide the source of renewal and support to the continuing growth of parent-teacher relationships. Gelfer (1991) outlines actions that the communication process should aim to achieve with parents during the early childhood years.

- Promote a bond between home experiences and the educational program.
- Help parents increase their understanding of child development.
- Engage parents in assessing, implementing, and evaluating their child's growth.
- Empower parents in their parent as teacher role.
- Support parents in learning how to meet various family needs.

- Build a strong working partnership between parents and the professional staff.

Swick (1991, pp. 131-132) identifies some of the more notable indicators of successful parent-teacher communication actions.

> Some of the more notable indicators of relationships that have achieved this sense of mutuality related to high regard include sensitivity to each other's needs and situations; continuous communication with each other; going beyond the expected in helping and supporting each other; being responsive to each other's inquiries in an active manner; and participating in proactive activities that enhance each other's self-esteem.

In attempting to achieve this sense of mutuality in communication with parents, Berger (1991) offers the following specific ideas.

- Phrase your message in the *positive tone*; parents react more favorably when they are initially engaged in a positive manner.

- Become an *effective listener*; it is the basis for meaningful communication! Consider the following activities:

    - Be receptive, encourage the parent to share their ideas and feelings.
    - Be attentive, let parents know you are indeed paying attention to their message.
    - Use silence to communicate your support and sincere involvement in the communication process.
    - Seek agreement, focus on the broad themes that parent and teacher can build their mutual goals on.
    - Create a truly responsive environment for listening.

- Use *rephrasing of messages* to clarify and refine what is being discussed between you and the parent. This process helps everyone focus on the real issues involved.

- Use *positive reframing* of messages to help parents see the positive aspects of sensitive issues.

- Encourage *reflective listening* in yourself and in the parents.

Communication Techniques That Empower

A diversity of communication techniques is essential to developing effective relationships with parents in today's complex family-society mix. The cultural, social, demographic, and personal needs and styles of parenting require that professionals not only use different techniques but adapt them within an individualized approach to parent and family involvement (Powell, 1989). A variety of communication techniques are explored here to provide teachers and other professionals with an overview of how these processes can be used effectively.

Conferences

Beyond the traditional conference setting of parent and teacher have emerged new, more individualized approaches: telephone conferencing, parent-child-teacher conferencing, team conferencing, and group conferences. Regardless of the type of conference, however, the emphasis is on sharing information, getting feedback from each other, being supportive of each other, planning school and home learning activities, and carrying out many other partnership actions (Swick, 1991).

The successful conference is the end result of teacher and support team planning. Regardless of whomever is serving on the team (teachers, counselors, administrators, parents), a knowledge of effective communication skills and organizational-management skills is essential to long term success. Usually, conferences of an individual or team nature focus on the development of an individualized educational program for the child. More recently, this focus has been broadened to include child and family educational needs and strengths (Dunst & Trivette, 1988).

A basic understanding of the ways in which people communicate (Communication Skills) is vital to successful conferences. As teachers and support staff organize for conferences, they should reflect on the following questions:

1. Have I left time for parents to express their concerns?

2. Have I expressed my major points clearly and in a nonthreatening manner?

3. Have I established a supportive environment where parents feel comfortable in asking questions and sharing important information?

4. Have I provided parents with pre-conference materials, information, and ideas on how they can come prepared for a meaningful and enjoyable conference?

5. Have I refined my communication skills by examining materials on this topic through professional training activities and readings?

Effective communication skills provide the best means for having positive and useful conferences.

Successful conferences are the result of sound planning and organizational practices. In terms of organization, the conference can be viewed as three dimensional: pre-conference planning, the actual conference, and post-conference follow-up activities (Swick, 1984).

Plan in advance what the objectives of the conference are and what approaches you plan to use in implementing the process. In consultation with parents (it is good practice to have parents on your planning team) decide times, dates, and related issues that will make for success. Be sensitive to the work schedules, family situations, and related issues that parents have voiced. As you plan the daily conference schedule leave plenty of time for each conference. Parents need to know that they can have this special time with you without being pressured to finish too quickly.

The purpose of the conference dictates the kinds of materials needed. With a focus on child and family educational planning, usually you will want child developed materials and anecdotal notes (materials from the child's portfolio) to share with parents. Encourage parents to bring materials from home or to write down their observations to share with you. Make every attempt to use materials that are clear and understandable to parents. Have a prepared written summary of child progress for the parent so that they can leave the conference with something concrete on their child's growth and development (Lawler, 1991).

Other conference emphases may include discipline, home learning activities, parent initiated concerns, and parent-teacher support items. *Whatever the focus, make sure parents know in advance of all of the details of the conference.* Communicate with parents on all aspects of the conference. Be sensitive to their concerns, send reminder notes (or telephone calls), and be alert to other pre-conference planning needs.

The most productive conferences are conducted in physical settings that invite discussion and exchange of ideas between parents and teachers. Avoid creating physical barriers of authority between you and the parent. Organize a setting that is comfortable, open to movement, and equipped to deal with the requirements of the conference.

Satir's (1988) communication reminders can make for a successful conference:

- Always begin and end the conference on a positive note.
- Never criticize, condemn, or complain unless it can be done constructively.
- Always show sincere appreciation, make the parent feel wanted and important, listen carefully, and be supportive of the parent.

The actual conference provides an excellent opportunity for parents and teachers to share their resources in developing the best possible educational environment for children and themselves. As the focus is on the child and the family, communicate positively with parents about all aspects of the child and the family. Allow time for parents (indeed encourage them) to share with you what has been happening in the home environment. Invite them to be more of a part of the classroom environment too! The goal is to develop a plan and context where teachers, parents, and children can grow together in productive ways. ***Involve, support, and praise parents*** throughout the conference. Let them know that you believe in a partnership approach to learning and need their continued involvement.

Postconference activities typically include the development of a specific individualized educational plan (or summary of a plan) that evolves from the work of parent and teacher. Share this plan with the parents and reinforce in them your positive support of their helping carry out this plan. The initial conference should be the beginning of continuous communication.

Group conferences have emerged as an added dimension of this process. Typically, where parents and teachers have a common need for information, support, or sharing of resources—the group conference proves very useful (Lawler, 1991). Many teachers, for example, have used the group setting to share information on their program at the opening of school or to update parents on new curriculum materials. Additional uses of the group conference include: problem solving, parent networking, development of family-school social activities, enrichment activities for teachers and parents, and community awareness activities (Swick, 1991).

Telephone conferences have gained tremendous momentum as parents and teachers find themselves with very hectic lives. These are typically of an informal nature where parent and teacher focus on an immediate concern or update each other on recent events.

Problem solving conferences need to be planned with sensitivity to parental concerns and with regards to positive communication skills. Lawler (1991) and Morgan (1989) offer excellent guidelines in this regard.

- Remember, you are working with parents not against them—focus on the positive and use a consensus approach to problem solving.
- Reassure and support parents as child problems may indeed shake their self-confidence—they need your support now more than ever.
- Use an exploratory and sensitive approach to seeing the problem from the parent perspective—remember the parent has his or her own unique definition of the situation.
- You and the parent do not always have to have an answer to the problem that day. Keep in mind that in some cases time for reflection can lead to better problem solving.
- Above all nurture in yourself and in the parents a warm and trusting relationship.

Home Visits

Home and personal visitation have proven to be among the most effective of communication practices. Perhaps the most substantive aspect of this technique is its nurturance of the parent and family perspective. As Osborn (1991) notes, home visiting has been a successful part of educational and family support efforts for centuries. While our focus is on parent-teacher communication, keep in mind that home visits offer many opportunities for parent education and family-community strengthening. *The basic premise of the home visit is that parents are an integral force in their children's lives and thus need to be engaged in empowering activities* (Swick, 1993).

Beyond the limited confines of most communication techniques, home visits have goals that reach toward the total involvement of the parent-teacher-child team in meaningful teaching and learning activities. Home visit functions include: helping professionals gain more sensitive insight into parent and family needs, strengths, and perspectives; providing parents opportunities to share their learning environment with professionals; opening up parents and teachers to the many dimensions of home and school learning; allowing for parents and teachers to share their knowledge of child development and learning; and for teachers to be able to reach parents who might not otherwise be able to participate in the communication process (Swick, 1984).

Effective home visit programs require careful goal development, advanced planning, and staff/parent training.

For example, goals should reflect the mutual interests and needs of parents and professionals. *Goal areas often include:* education, support, feedback, and participatory decision making (Powell, 1989). One of the communication areas parents and teachers agree is important is that of enriching children's learning in the home. While there are different approaches, the home visit (when well organized and carried out by trained staff) offers the intimacy and the one-to-one contact time needed for parent-teacher-child interactions on home learning possibilities.

Content and home visit procedures need to be well organized and clearly communicated to parents. The purpose, content, time, and related aspects of the visit should emerge from teacher and parent input (Swick, 1984). Advanced preparation alerts parents to the value and place of the home visit in their perspective and it offers teachers the chance to establish the framework for the visit. Effective visits are organized but flexible in relation to the unique situation of each family. For example, the plan may be to update the parents on the child's progress at school, provide them with learning materials they can use with the child at home, and to gain their input on any concerns they might have related to the child's development and/or with regards to what is happening at school. *Alternative ways for parents to be involved need to be available as not all parents wish to be visited.* Yet the home visit has proved to be one of the most powerful communication techniques because it places the parent in a position of strength and brings the teacher into contact with the home environment.

The home visit calls for specialized training in helping and communication roles (Wasik, Bryant, & Lyons, 1990). They suggest training in the five basic helping skills: observing, listening, questioning, probing, and prompting. Observation is the foundation for being an effective home visitor. With a positive perspective as the basis, the home visitor can be looking for family strengths and needs that can be supported through the home visitation process. They can also be observing for factors that may be impeding the learning process and encouraging parents to become a part of this process. Listening is the learning dimension of the visitation process. Nonverbal and verbal messages of parents and children need to be noted with particular importance given to the real meaning or intent of these messages. We need to be sensitive to our own messages too! Are we supportive in our body language and are we open to parent questions and concerns? Questioning is the means by which home visitors can gain a full and sensitive perspective on the family. Facilitative, nurturing, and guiding questions will provide a basis for trust development and collaborative relationships with the family. Probing and prompting help both parents and staff expand their understanding of each other—which is essential to having meaningful and growing relationships.

Swick (1984, pp. 105-106) elaborates on additional home visitor training needs.

> Home visitors need a thorough knowledge base in child development, family dynamics, communication skills and home visitation techniques. While many potential home visitors will have acquired these skills in their early childhood training, some staff will need all or part of this training (or renewal on some of the skills).

Attitudes are critical to the success of home visitors. Keep in mind that we are models for parents and children, they look to us as leaders in the educational process. Morrison (1978) identifies desired qualities of effective home visit leaders: honesty, trust, compassion, caring, courteous, motivated, tactful, and sensitive. While training programs can never assure that home visitors have all of these traits, they can nurture and focus on them in the training process. Swick (1984, p. 110) suggests ten guidelines for having successful home visits.

1. Arrive at the home on time and be prepared for a positive visit.

2. Begin the visit in a cordial, positive, and purposeful manner.

3. Keep focused on the purpose, involve the parent(s) in the process, and be personable.

4. Be a good listener, responsive to parental questions and concerns. Take an interest in the family's personal strengths but also keep the focus on the purpose of the visit.

5. Be both honest and realistic in your assessments of child and family strengths.

6. Show your concern for the family by being sensitive to the various problems they face.

7. Be flexible and composed in dealing with family behaviors that may be at variance with your ideas about family life.

8. Where appropriate involve the child in the visit. Young children are positively influenced by your visit to the home and need to be involved wherever possible.

9. Avoid conducting home visits at times that may interrupt or impede the family's functioning.

10. Avoid ending the conference on a negative note. Always project some positive outcomes and support these with specific things the family can do.

Newsletters

Classroom-developed newsletters (especially those where children and parents have been a part of the development process) are excellent for keeping everyone informed about what is happening in the classroom, the projects being carried out or planned, and for the sharing of family-oriented material such as new books or special family television programs, and other such materials or events. This communication form is typically efficient and effective in reaching all parents. Classroom developed newsletters, especially those where the children have had a major part in developing, are of great interest to parents. Included with many such newsletters are teacher-written notes on each individual child's progress or new events that are taking shape in the classroom. These supplemental written notes are of real value in keeping parents informed (Swick, 1991).

Newsletter calendars that include monthly information of interest to parents and children are valuable. These calendars typically include menu information, forthcoming classroom activities, special events, parent-teacher meetings, and other important information. With new computer developed calendars this strategy is now easily within the reach of most teachers and is a very effective way of involving parents too! Parents enjoy and use newsletters, especially those that have items of concern to them and their children. Effective newsletters involve parents in the design and content, include items about what the children are accomplishing, are attractive, and are easily posted in the home. Some suggestions for making the newsletter technique effective include:

- Involve parents and children in their development and distribution.
- Make them personable, attractive, and readable.
- Include "two-way" communication items in the newsletter, where parents can respond to items by invitation.
- Include children's work in each issue of the newsletter.
- Have a parents corner where parents can share concerns and issues.
- Each issue should include some "shared learning activity" for parents and children to do together.
- Have parents and children evaluate the newsletter each year.

Surveys and Inventories: Gaining Parent Views

Communication needs to be continuous and two-way, with various means available to parents to express their views to teachers and other professionals. *Surveys* provide all parents with a way of giving teachers and schools feedback on particular issues. Unfortunately, programs often wait until conflicts emerge before using the survey method. Properly used, the survey should be an ongoing means of getting parent ideas for integration into the program (Swick, 1984). The survey should be a part of a comprehensive approach to parent-teacher communication. It is only effective when supplemented by more personal and intimate ways for parents and teachers to elaborate on the issues determined of importance.

The following are some suggestions for making this technique useful and productive.

- Have a clear purpose for surveying parents, do some basic advance work with parents so they know what the survey is about.
- Make sure the survey is readable and can be accomplished in a short period of time by parents.
- Have at least one open ended place on the survey for parents to elaborate on their ideas.
- Share results of the survey with parents and let them know how their feedback is going to be used.

In contrast to gaining opinions in surveys, *inventories* are used to have parents take stock of particular aspects of the program or to get their ideas on how programs might best be developed. An inventory can be used to determine the talents various parents have and thus could contribute to a parent resource program. Parent meeting topics, best time and day for meetings, and issues of priority for meetings are additional items that parents might be inventoried on. If used as an "inventory" of parent views on specific aspects of program and classroom functioning, this form of communication is very helpful. It is not, however, a mode to use for probing parent views on controversial issues. Rather, group discussions and individual conference settings would be better for handling difficult issues. One real strength of the inventory is that it offers a way of involving all parents in the partnership process (Swick, 1991).

Telecommunications: Reach Out And Touch A Parent

The busy world of parents and teachers has prompted some creative ways of communication. The composite of telecommunication resources provide parents and teachers with a medium in which instant and interactive communication are possible. This world of technology offers many new dimensions for the parent-teacher relationship. Consider the emerging potential in computer technology as well as interactive television. The key, as always, will be that these instant means of communication be used appropriately and not as sole means of forming and maintaining partnerships. ***Parents, children, and teachers need the personal contact with each other that no piece of technology can replace.***

If used effectively the telephone can be one way of involving parents in the educational program. Many areas of communication can be addressed: child progress reports, gaining feedback from parents on new issues in the classroom, alerting parents to sudden changes in school schedules or activities, or contacting parents about upcoming events such as conferences. Swick (1984, p. 199) describes another very creative use of this technology.

> At a more sophisticated level some schools are using taped phone messages as a means of keeping parents informed of the daily activities of students and teachers. For example, one classroom teacher taped the homework assignments for that day and summarized what happened in the classroom that day. Parents could call anytime each day except between 3:30–4:00 when the new taped message was being prepared.

Bauch (1988) describes more interactive uses of technology for promoting a responsive parent-teacher partnership. In Bauch's approach, parents can leave messages for teachers and teachers can have prepared messages for parents. Swick (1991) also describes ways that computer modems might be used to foster parent-child-teacher shared communication experiences.

Video taped teacher information programs offer another new dimension to the communication process. This technique is especially effective in communicating the substance of group programs for parents who are unable to attend. It is also an excellent way of reinforcing basic home learning concepts that teachers would like parents to support in their family interactions with children. Swick (1992) shares how one group of teachers shared parent education program materials with parents through short, teacher-made videotapes. *The arena of computer technology and telecommunication offers parents and teachers unlimited resources for creating continuing relationships.*

Open House And Group Programs

One of the most popular forms of school opening activities is the *Open House*. Through observing effective and ineffective open house programs, Swick (1991) notes that planning and organization are the keys to having a program that indeed involves open communication between parents and teachers. *The most effective open house programs* have a structure that includes an opening information and welcome segment for all parents, a more focused time for open observation and discussion in the child's classroom, and opportunities for planning for more individualized contacts with the teacher and the school (Ball, 1985). Some programs are enhanced by having a family meal and/or light refreshments. This type of program is very appealing to parents and teachers. It offers an opportunity to share with parents many materials that help explain the school's programs and what is expected of them.

Many additional communication opportunities can be initiated during the open house program. For example, here is a chance to discuss with parents their sharing of talents and resources at school, their involvement on advisory councils and other school improvement groups, and their continuing communication through conferences. Swick (1984) and Ball (1985) suggest the following as ideas for planning effective open house projects.

- Form a planning team inclusive of parents that targets the kinds of activities parents want to hear and see during the open house.

- Have a clear purpose that is advertised and communicated to parents in several ways. Posters, radio spots, and newspaper articles are effective in attracting parent participation.

- Provide a flexible and nicely organized program where parents can participate in positive and useful ways. Avoid long speeches and needless meeting time.

- Have staff agreement on the full participation of all staff in the open house program. Also, involve parents as peer leaders in helping new parents to feel welcome.

Group information and sharing sessions have gained renewed popularity among parents and teachers. Parents are particularly interested in age-specific and developmental-specific information as related to their children's school and home involvement. Of interest to parents and teachers are opportunities to solve problems, clarify needs, support each other, and strengthen the family-school system. Powell (1989) observed the sharing and mentoring possibilities in the group process. He and others (Rich, 1987; Swick, 1993) strongly suggest that discussion time be a planned part of group meetings. Parents truly want communication time in addition to the information part of the meeting. The following are topics and issues that parents and teachers identify as most appropriate and useful for group meetings.

Positive Discipline
Child-Related Interests
Television Alternatives
Home Learning Activities
Changing Development of Child
Parent Networking

Swick (1991) notes four key components of successful group meetings: clear and meaningful purpose, well planned meeting system, participation of parents in the shaping of the agenda, and an action-oriented approach to the meeting.

Portfolios and Progress Report Forms

In place of the traditional report card has emerged a more responsive form of child progress reporting and parent-teacher communication on such progress. *The key to effective report forms and portfolios is the involvement* *of child, parent, and teacher in their development and use.* The function of any child assessment process is to promote success in their learning experiences. Necessarily this involves a process of feedback to them, their parents, and to ourselves as the professionals involved in nurturing the learning system. Report forms, for example, typically include information on child performance in academic, social, and related behavioral areas. The focus today is on highlighting strengths and needs so as to share with parents a balanced perspective on the child's development and learning. An integral part of this approach is the involvement of children in planning the reporting process (often called portfolio development) and the involvement of parents in helping with its development.

The portfolio concept is based on a team approach to learning and is ideally suited as a means of parent-child-teacher communication. It might include items such as the following:

- Skills checklists in the domains of social, language, cognitive, and perceptual learning.
- Teacher narrative on particular features of the child's learning style, specific talents of the child, interesting products the child has made, and other important items.
- Parent notes on how the child has extended their learning in the home environment or through community enrichment experiences.
- Child comments on their own learning accomplishments, needs, and plans.
- Child products made during the period under review by teacher and parents.

A Communication Potpourri

Given the dynamic and complex lives of parents and teachers, many kinds of communication are needed. Beyond the more traditional ways of conferencing and written communications, there are several *informal and yet very effective strategies:* telephoning parents on updates or reminders on meetings; daily recorded messages on homework tasks and/or on key ideas covered in school that day; once-a-week homework hot-line reviews; and technology based exchanges (fax, modem access, interactive home-school closed-circuit communication strategies) (Bauch, 1988; Becker & Epstein, 1982). Some additional communication strategies include: weekly student work folders sent home; "notes home" on work covered that week; "Parent Grams" that go once a month and review key ideas covered; a parent bulletin board posted near the most parent-traveled part of the room; monthly telephone calls on parent feedback; small-group lunch time discussions with parents; morning coffees with parents; helping parents develop a parent support newsletter; and parent-only nights.

Meaningful and continuous parent-teacher communication requires staff and parent involvement in training and renewal activities. The long-term success of parent-teacher partnerships is based on positive and nurturing communication relationships.

Communication Styles: Keys To Understanding

Techniques for communication are only as effective as the styles people use in their communicative relationships. Many problems emerge because parents and teachers do not understand each others' styles of communication. Miller, Nunally, & Wackman (1975) provide us with a framework of *four basic styles of communication*. These styles are briefly described as follows.

Styles of Communication

Superficial	"Ms. Shabazz, I love your new haircut!"
	"The weather has been bad all week, hasn't it? It's too bad when the children can't play outside."
Command	"You must let James get by with murder at home. He has misbehaved in school all year."
	"Don't you ever give Corrine a bath?"
	"Why do you let Timmy watch so much television? He should be getting his sleep."
Intellectual	"It is important that we consider all the alternatives before we make a decision on Ron's placement for next year."
	"In a course I am taking, I learned that too much television can cause children to become passive."

"Sex-role development is dependent on conditioning and modeling."

Caring "I am concerned about Timmy. Sometimes he seems so tired in school. I am worried that he isn't getting enough sleep."

"I have some concerns about James' behavior in school." I have heard that too many sweets in a child's diet may affect behavior. I am wondering if you have noticed that he begins to behave aggressively after eating sweets at home?"

A close look at the four communication styles helps us to understand that people of different beliefs and orientation have different ways of communicating. For example, *the superficial style is very informal.* It is the type of talking that one is likely to hear at an informal gathering like open house or at a party. It is not very useful for solving problems or seriously examining an issue of concern to parents and teachers. *The command style is more of a persuasive or demanding way of communicating.* People often use this style when they are angry or are trying to defend themselves or to persuade others to see things their way. This style of communication is often more hurtful than helpful as it tends to cause people to emotionally react in defensive ways. *The intellectual style is an information giving approach where facts and information are primary.* While it is useful in solving problems, people can become intimidated by this style if they cannot understand the information given or if it is given in an intimidating manner. When information is presented in a positive and supportive way, it is more influential and useful. *The caring style is more open and authentic* than the other styles. When people use this style, they state feelings and personal information and they ask others to share their feelings and concerns. *The intellectual and caring styles combined provide a good combination for effective communication.*

Most people have developed both effective and ineffective aspects of these different styles of communication. In general, the *superficial style* is known and used by most all of us. It is the "chit-chat" we carry on when simply trying to be conversant or socially visible to others. It is not a serious form of communication - although some researchers tell us that what we informally discuss has serious implications for how we interact with others (Swick, 1984). This style is helpful in opening up communication lines and it is useful in helping small groups relax and enter into discussion. As a communication style, it is low-risk with little substantive information being shared and yet often used in open-ended communication situations like the open house.

The *command style* of communication is open to many interpretations. It really does not imply that one is dictating how another person should function, at least that is not its true meaning. It is really an information style of communication - like a lecture on a topic that people want information on. In terms of parent-teacher communication, many parents want the command style used when they are seeking information on a new or current topic. For example, in parent education programs, the initial part of the session might be a lecture (command) and then later some discussion on the information obtained. One needs to be careful how this style is used as it can prompt people to be defensive if it is misconstrued as an attempt to control the person (Swick, 1984). It is most effectively used in conjunction with other styles like the caring style.

The *intellectual style* is best suited for problem solving types of communication, and even then must be used in a supportive manner. The strength of this style is that it does help us to objectify a situation and thus gain a more comprehensive understanding of a situation. The danger, however, is that this style can be threatening to parents who may not be familiar with its usage. The teacher who uses jargon to overwhelm parents with information ends up losing the confidence and trust of those parents. It can also be damaging when people simply use it to defend their position as opposed to truly seeking for a solution (Swick, 1984).

The *caring style* is open and authentic. Unfortunately, most people have had little training or experience in using this style. The caring style, combined with key elements of the other styles, is essential for long-term communications with parents. It is a risky style in that people using it open themselves up and report personal feelings, thoughts, and intentions. However, it is such a powerful tool of communication that the risks are worth taking. It is the caring relationship that holds the most potential for growth and that is the best model for children (Galinsky, 1987).

A caring style of communication requires four sets of skills: listening, self-disclosure, shared meaning, and combining the above skills with a commitment to build and maintain self-other esteem. Listening skills involve attending to the ideas of another person. It also requires that we plan what we are going to be discussing with this person and that we intentionally focus on their ideas. An important element in good listening is body language. Good listeners usually give themselves away by their body language; they maintain eye contact and orient their bodies toward the person to whom they are listening.

Skills of self-disclosure include being aware of self-information and being willing and able to share that self-information with others. There are five kinds of personal information that can be shared with a good listener. *Sensory data* is the first. This includes what is seen, heard, tasted, touched, or smelled. Next is interpretation or *thought data*. For example, "I saw Jimmy fall asleep in class every day last week. I interpreted that to mean he was staying up late watching television." If you shared this self-information with a parent, the parent might say, "I am glad you told me that Jimmy was falling asleep but he actually has not been watching television; instead, his father is sick and I have been leaving him with a baby sitter who cannot seem to get him to go to bed on time." Contrast this approach with the teacher who says only "You are letting Jimmy watch too much television." A quite different reaction would be forthcoming from the parent. After sharing sensory information and interpretation, the next step in sharing self-information is to *share feelings*. Feelings are emotions and usually involve gut-level reactions. Sadness, anger, fear, joy, and happiness are some words for feelings. The teacher mentioned before could report feelings like this. "Jimmy fell asleep in school every day last week. I interpreted this to mean that he was watching television late at night. I am worried about his school work. I am afraid that he will fail in many of his studies." An additional type of personal information is *intentions*. In this area, I tell you what I plan to do and then the last step is to actually implement my plan.

A caring style also requires shared meaning. The skill needed in this area is to receive the actual message sent by the other person. This requires a concerted effort on the part of the sender and the listener. The self-disclosure must be accurate and the message received must be processed effectively. In practicing shared meaning the sender sends an important message to the receiver. For example, a parent may say "Delores told me that all she does in school is play." The teacher's immediate reaction might be to get defensive. Instead the teacher could say, "I understand that Delores said we play all day in school. I interpret your concern to be that you don't think children should play in school. Is that right?" Only through additional questions and answers and establishing shared meaning can the teacher and parent realize that the teacher sees play as a child's work. What Delores has described as play may involve many learning experiences for her.

Finally, the use of the *caring style* requires people to integrate the skills of listening, self-disclosure, shared meaning, and a caring attitude toward people as the communication process is actualized. Unfortunately, many people have habituated the use of a command or intellectual style in defense of self rather than to share their ideas and feelings in an open fashion. The *caring style of communication* requires that we reshape our ideas and behaviors related to listening, discussion, openness to others, and our very understanding of why we communicate.

Communication: The Vital Link

Every aspect of parent-teacher-child and family-school involvement is based on communication. Our *communication strategies* (beliefs, perceptions, and actions) provide the foundation upon which we relate to parents and children. Our beliefs need to be focused on high regard for self and others, a sincere attitude toward the value of communication as a means for growth with parents, children, and families, and proactive actions that reflect a partnership approach to working with parents and families.

Our selection and use of *communication techniques* should reflect the sensitive understanding of the needs of parents and families and the realities they face in their lives. Flexible, sensitive, inclusive, and responsive techniques need to be used. Techniques like home visiting, conferencing, involving parents in classroom activities, open house programs, and other activities can be effective when used in relation to the needs parents and children express to us.

Translating the human goal to communicate effectively with other people into a system for accomplishing that goal *requires the development and use of appropriate communication styles*. The different styles of communication each have value when used in relation to the shared values of parents and teachers. Respect for each other and the mission of the partnership are essential to long-term communicative relationships. As Swick (1991, p. 117) notes, the ultimate goal is for parents and teachers to develop growing partnerships that nurture in children and in themselves a life-long desire for learning.

> Together, parents and teachers need to conceive of their partnership as growth-oriented experiences in which they seek to nurture each other toward becoming full partners in their support of children's learning and development. In this empathetic approach, teachers and parents must begin their journey with high regard for each other, their children, and the partnership they are seeking to develop. This calls for seeing each other as capable people, for listening to each other (and our innerselves) in responsive and supportive ways, and for nurturing each other toward the full realization of our talents.

Chapter Nineteen

CONFLICT AND CONFRONTATION AS OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEARNING

The very nature of parent-teacher and family-school communication lends itself to conflict and confrontation. Parents and teachers face so many challenges and perform such complex roles that their relationships are likely to have conflicting moments and even some confrontational situations. The tragedy is that professionals and parents rarely experience learning opportunities where they gain confidence in using conflict and confrontation as growth opportunities.

Sources Of Conflict And Confrontation

A close analysis of some of the sources of parent-teacher conflicts and ways to use these situations as learning opportunities is essential to our skill in being proactive communicators. The sources of conflict and the potential for using these situations as learning opportunities are explored in the parent-teacher communication literature (Lawler, 1991).

Several factors have been noted as influencing the emergence of parent-teacher conflicts: lack of communication, a failure to account for the other person's perceptions or needs, anxiety over one's inability to solve a particular issue, displacement of one's frustration toward others, and disgust over another person's failure to respond to a situation (Swick, 1991). These types of communication barriers tend to promote stress within the teacher-parent relationship. Yet, as Swick (1991, p. 124) notes—this situation can lead to growth for parents and teachers.

> All relationships experience the stress of role conflicts. Indeed, the nature of intense partnerships such as those that take place between parents and teachers require stress points as a means of feedback and stimulus for growth. For example, teachers who expect parents to be at every activity may feel stressed as some parents define their participation in more limited ways. This conflict can function as a point of dialogue between teachers and parents on what are desired and realistic expectations for each other's participation.

Teachers and parents have valuable perspectives on the sources of conflicts. *Teachers point to the following as some of the major sources of stress in parents* that they believe are often at the foundation of conflict and confrontation: personal trauma, family dysfunction, overload from work and family schedules, lack of support, mental health problems, major value differences with the school, and very specific and valid concerns about teachers or school situations (Becker & Epstein, 1982). Research indicates that parental fears of school reprisals for voicing concerns is often rooted in their past negative experiences with teachers and schools. Failure as a child, rejection by teachers in more recent school contacts, and observed negative experiences of their children all combine to become major psychological sources of conflict in parents (Chavkin, 1989).

Parents identify the following as sources of stress in teachers that often lead to conflict and confrontation: lack of training, poor working conditions (especially overcrowded classrooms), lack of support, burnout, value differences with families, and low pay (Galinsky, 1988). Research suggests that most teacher-parent conflicts are the result of the low priority given to the parent-teacher partnership and the inadequate preparation of teachers and parents regarding the communication process (Schaefer, 1991).

Cultural Insensitivity: Source Of Conflict Or Learning Opportunity?

In too many cases parent-teacher conflicts are rooted in the cultural insensitivities that often exist where people have distorted ideas about each other. Lightfoot (1978) appropriately identified this distortion process and its outcome as the *World's Apart Syndrome.* Teacher and parent misconceptions regarding each other's cultural heritage and values lead to many conflicts. These conflicts tend to impede the relationships of everyone involved in the teaching and learning process. In particular, they erode children's power to develop healthy self-other images. Three of the most damaging elements of culturally insensitive environments are: the development of incorrect stereotypes, distortion of one's perceptions regarding others' learning capabilities, and the promotion of a world's apart syndrome in parent-teacher relationships (Swick, 1991).

When parents or teachers lack a full understanding of each other's culture, *they tend to rely on stereotypes*—images that usually are very incomplete and incorrect (Suransky, 1982). Cultural stereotypes arise out of the need for individuals to react to something with which they are insecure; lacking in information about a person or event, they thus need an image of how to respond. In a debilitating and often subliminal way, many people are imprisoned by their incomplete and often false cultural images they have of others who are different (Fantini, 1982; Lightfoot, 1978).

This type of cultural insensitivity and miseducation has prompted many conflicts and confrontations between parents and teachers. Consider the bilingual child who is placed in a low reading group but who is reading fluently at home in his natural context. Or, consider the child who refuses to confront the teacher on a mistaken concept because it would be a show of disrespect. These and other stereotypical responses to children's differences create distrust in the parent-teacher and family-school relationship process (Swick, 1993). They also tend to engender in children a sense of inadequacy related to school learning and they promote in parents a sense of isolation (Fantini, 1982).

Multicultural learning, then, is the most powerful means available for resolving conflicts that arise from cultural ignorance and/or insensitivity. The following are examples of ways to promote cultural understanding among parents, children, and teachers.

- Teacher involvement in learning about the values and attributes of children and families from different cultures.
- Teacher-Parent activities that promote a sharing and supportive relationship.
- Learning experiences that broaden everyone's cultural knowledge about themselves and others.
- Family-School Cultural Activities that promote a responsive and respectful attitude about the importance of multicultural learning.
- Refinement and adaptation of school curricula and instructional practices to reflect a sensitivity to the ways in which different children learn.

Within the context of cultural distortion, there are many misunderstandings related to how children learn (Suransky, 1982). Unfortunately, when people do not understand the learning styles of others, they often see them as inferior to their way of relating to life. For example, it is not uncommon for some teachers to spend more time with learners whose values are similar to theirs and thus "avoiding" much contact with those who are different. Indeed, in some cases, children's learning differences are seen as deficits. A good example of this misconception is the bilingual child's initial shyness in English-speaking classrooms. While the teacher may see this shyness as a lack of initiative, further assessment will usually reveal that the child is simply adjusting to a new environment, much like adults do when confronted with a totally new situation (Swick, 1984).

Value differences, situational elements, and divergent learning styles offer parents and teachers many opportunities for shared learning. Consider the following strategies as examples of the potential in multicultural learning for promoting growth in parent-teacher relationships.

- Teacher interest and involvement in getting to know parents on a personal level, becoming familiar with their interests, values, and various situations.
- Parent-teacher sharing of cultural, family, and school interests and concerns as related to broadening and strengthening their partnership.
- Teacher involvement in learning about learning styles research and ways to apply these concepts to working with children from different cultures.
- Parental resource persons in cultural and social values and rituals that can be shared in the classroom.
- Family-school cultural enrichment activities that foster a supportive understanding among teachers and families about the positive aspects of their cultural differences.

The "World's Apart" syndrome that exists in some school-family relationships can be transformed into a "learning relationship" that promotes unity through the integration of cultural differences into the partnership in positive ways. Teacher assessment of their attitudes, skills, and resources (related to planning a multicultural early childhood program) is a first step. The fostering of parent involvement in learning about and contributing to the school's cultural enrichment is another step in this process. Teacher-parent partnership activities that are directed toward enriching the curriculum and each other's perspectives is certain to strengthen children's position for success in school and life. ***The enrichment that comes from a truly multicultural learning partnership can enable parents, children, and teachers to develop proactive understandings of each other.***

Recognizing Parent Concerns As Valid: Inviting The Parent View

As Morgan (1989) notes, great pleasure or serious conflict can evolve from situations where parents and teachers respond to the legitimate concerns that both might have about the child's learning and development. Various conflicts and confrontations have emerged because teachers and parents have failed to account for each other's views in a responsive and caring manner. *The first and most basic step involved in preventing or resolving parent-teacher conflicts is to* ***accept and indeed value the parental perspective regarding their concerns*** (Swick, 1991).

Morgan (1989), Rich (1987), and Swick (1991) suggest several *teacher perspectives* that support a positive approach to understanding and acting on parent concerns. The most basic of these perspectives is to understand that most parents deeply care for their children and may express this caring in less than positive ways (Swick, 1991). For example, the parent who is "angry" that he was called from work to deal with his child's very disruptive behavior may initially express dismay with the teacher. Keep in mind that your focus is on the child's behavior and usually so is the parent's concern— albeit that it may momentarily be on the teacher. Accept the parent's concern and their anger, let them know that you did not like having to take them from their work—but the severity of the problem required it. Also, invite the parent's view(s) on the problem and offer to work with them in positive ways toward a resolution. Help the parent put this problem into perspective—they are not the only parent who has had a child with behavior problems at school. They need to see this as a part of the growth process—for the child and for themselves. Your acceptance of their perspective and your desire to work with them in supportive ways brings the needed hope to many parents.

Another basic perspective relates to recognizing that parents may actually be asking for validation on their being good parents (Morgan, 1989). Although rarely voiced, most parents reflect this concern about their personal competence in the parenting role in the questions they ask. For example, "Do you think Jim is developing like the other children?" This question may, in the parent's mind be "Do you think I am doing okay in guiding Jim's development?" By helping parents to realize that there is no perfect answer to many parenting issues, teachers can enable them to relax with their competence in place. Teachers who do not understand this basic parent need can do great harm by reacting only to the apparent question as opposed to the total intent of the parent. In many cases, a supportive word and action from the teacher can transform the anxiety and anger of the parent into more productive relationships with the teacher. Morgan (1989, p. 53) offers excellent advice in this regard:

Whenever appropriate and possible, acknowledge parents' competencies and skills. At times this may take real creativity on the teacher's part. You can always compliment parents who bring up a concern for recognizing they need help to resolve a problem. Your sincere praise of their efforts can enhance their self-esteem. Parents who feel good about themselves are better equipped to give their children the encouragement they need to resolve a problem.

Parental perspectives about school-related problems are heavily influenced by their values and the stress they face. Recognize and account for the stress that parents may be facing as you relate to them and their children. It should provide a context for making more reasoned judgments about how you see problems and solutions. Value differences also need to be accepted and used as a means of enriching the family-school relationships (Swick, 1993).

Parental perspectives are also heavily influenced by their knowledge (or lack of) of child development. For example, Morgan's example (1989, p. 53) highlights the need for teachers to help parents develop appropriate and nurturing understandings of children's developmental needs.

> Raul's mother looked very worried when she confided to his teacher that she didn't know where this 2-year old was learning to throw his tantrums. "His father has a temper too," she said anxiously.
>
> The teacher calmly cited Raul's endearing qualities. She pointed out that many 2-year olds sometimes simply short-circuit from the overload of pressures growing up puts on them so young. The child's mother smiled affectionately and in relief.

Indeed parents naturally expect teachers to offer them guidance. Yet we need to feel comfortable in not trying to be all things to parents. Our imperfections can help us to share with parents that learning is indeed a continuing process.

Teachers can play a major role in helping parents grow toward a mutually beneficial relationship with their children, the teacher, and the school. This role can be achieved through many strategies but the following are certainly top priority.

- Establish and continually nurture *a parent-teacher relationship of warmth and trust.*
- Share information and resources with parents *in supportive and empathetic ways.*

- Create a "we" approach *to problem solving that is based on respect for parent values and concerns.*

Perhaps our greatest resource in helping parents realize our desire to be partners with them is in the way we communicate with them. *Focus on using language and behaviors that foster warmth, trust, support, and mutuality.*

Dealing Effectively With "Difficult Parents"

Uncooperative or "difficult" parents can preclude many positive things from the family-school relationship. Of course, "difficult" is a perception that typically indicates that some value or belief difference exists (Swick, 1991). Yet, many parent-teacher conflicts do evolve from authentically difficult and conflicting teacher-parent perspectives.

The first step in relating to "difficult parents" is to recognize that in many cases teachers unknowingly promote the difficult behavior rather than nurture new, more proactive behavior in parents (Swick, 1991). It is also important that professionals in early childhood education understand what the many dimensions of "difficult" are in relation to the parent-teacher communication process. Boutte, Keepler, Tyler, & Terry (1992) provide the following perspective:

> "Difficult" behavior on the part of parents includes behaviors that are uncooperative, belligerent, detached, or overpowering. Illiterate parents are frequently also classified as "difficult."

They identify and discuss six "difficult" parenting styles: antagonistic, "know-it-all," complaining, negative, shy/unresponsive, and illiterate. Boutte, Keepler, Tyler, & Terry (1991) provide brief descriptions of the attributes of these difficult parents and offer suggestions to teachers for effectively dealing with them.

> The Antagonistic Behavior Parent: This parent tends to be very sassy or verbally or physically abusive in relationships. This person may be unfriendly to the teacher and meet with them only because it is a requirement.
>
> *Teacher behaviors for relating to the antagonistic parent* include: encourage parent participation, wherever possible focus on positive parent behaviors, be clear that you will not accept abusive behavior, provide many opportunities for proactive parental involvement, and if the parent is overly hostile—seek assistance from other staff.

The "Know-It-All" Parent. The attitude of this type of parent is that they "know" just how their child should be taught. If the child is not progressing well, the teacher is usually identified as the source of the problem. This type of parent often pushes the child too fast and they themselves are often confronting personal insecurities.

Teacher behaviors for relating to this type of "know it all" parent include: be a good listener (even when you know the parent is incorrect), avoid becoming a "know-it-all" teacher, try to keep the parent and yourself focused on the purpose of the program, try to involve the parent in sharing a talent they have, and offer the parent learning opportunities where they can strengthen their understanding of children and the learning process.

The Complaining Parent: This parent seems difficult to please and complains often. Generally speaking, this parent expects perfection from others. In some cases, beneath the complainers' surface is some real and useful information—so do listen carefully!

Teacher behaviors for relating to the complaining parent include: listen attentively, avoid becoming defensive, acknowledge what the parent is saying by paraphrasing, redirect "complaints" toward proactive things the parent can do, where appropriate include the parents suggestions, and use specific questions as a way to solve the problems noted by the parent.

The Negative Parent: This parent is usually disagreeable and unwilling to try. He tends to have excuses for everything and rarely looks for proactive ways to approach things.

Teacher behaviors for relating to the negative parent include: avoid trying to argue the parent out of pessimism, be optimistic and realistic in your statements with parents, use praise whenever appropriate, leave room for parents to arrive at more positive views, and model positive behavior for parents.

The Shy/Unresponsive Parent: This parent is typically a silent, unresponsive person who does not talk much in situations where discussion would be expected. While some parents are naturally shy, many are unresponsive for specific reasons like fear of the unknown.

Teacher behaviors for relating to the shy/unresponsive parent include: use open ended questions (this encourages more participation), let parents know you want and expect their participation, allow time for responses, be supportive of parents when they do respond, and realize that noninvolvement may be a protective reaction to cover insecurities.

The Illiterate Parent: Remember, all parents can and do teach their children, even when they lack certain literacy skills. This parent has little or no reading ability and may attempt to hide this through various behaviors. Encourage parents in this situation to relate to their children using skills and talents they do have.

Teacher behaviors for relating to the illiterate parent include: praise parents for their existing strengths and skills, help parents to see that they can use materials like picture books effectively with their children, show parents how to relate to their children, encourage and support parents' involvement in literacy courses, and guide their efforts in positive ways.

As is shown in the different examples, the "difficult parent" syndromes need not preclude meaningful parent-teacher relationships. Effective teacher behaviors can help nurture parents toward more positive school involvement.

The "Unhappy Ending": A Time For Healing

Life is not perfect and parent-teacher communications rarely reach a stage of perfection. As Nancy Jacobs (1992) notes, there are unhappy endings where parents and teachers simply agree to part ways. The sources of conflicts that lead to unresolvable situations are varied. *Perhaps the most prevalent source is **a marked difference in expectations between the parent and the school.*** It may be that the parents, after considered analysis, have decided the differences are so distinct that they are not resolvable. Religious, personal, cultural, or other value differences often are the primary source of this stress. In other cases, the school may elect to end the relationship because of marked differences. Parents may be unwilling to follow certain school policies and thus are requested to leave.

Another source of unresolvable stress is the communication conflict that parents and teachers feel has reached a point of no return. For example, the school feels it has done all that is possible to help the family adjust to a specific problem with no productive outcome in sight. Parents feel differently; they see it as the school's problem and really not a family stress at all. This "stalemate" of perceptions and relationships can and sometimes does lead to an unhappy ending.

In yet other cases, ***the source of the unhappy ending is the school's recognition that they do not have the resources to help a particular family***. It may be that the child needs closer supervision and more individual attention than a school can offer. Or, the child may have a specific need the school feels can be met better in another school within the district.

When unhappy endings occur, Jacobs (1992) suggests the following as **ways to make leavings better**:

- If possible, slow the transition process to give time for appropriate preparation.
- Encourage and guide the parent to make a leaving plan with the child.
- Support the parent's plan as much as possible.
- Be sensitive to what a child's leaving can mean to those children remaining in the classroom.
- Assist the leaving child's classmates to say farewell in their own way.
- Be sensitive and support the parents of classmates.
- Be prepared for delayed reactions.
- Be open to criticism and learn from the experience, encourage staff and parents to discuss the outcome and what can be learned from it.

Solving Conflicts Through Problem Solving

Most conflicts and confrontations can be resolved. Galinsky (1988) and Swick (1991) point to the following as problem-solving steps that are useful in attempting to resolve conflicts.

- Describe the situation as a problem out in front. Avoid accusations or the implication that the source of the problem resides in the personality of the parent or the child (or the teacher).
- Generate multiple solutions. Parents and professionals should both do this, and no one's suggestions should be ignored, put down, or denounced.
- Discuss the pros and cons of each suggestion.

- Come to a consensus about which solutions to try.

- Discuss how you will implement these solutions.

- Agree to meet again to evaluate how these solutions are working so that you can change your approach if necessary.

Parents and teachers need to have respect and high regard for each other if the use of these steps is to work. No amount of problem solving skill can replace the needed sense of mutual trust between parents and teachers. Thus, even when the immediate problem is solved, the need for continuing communication is evident. Further, the nature of problems is that some require more intensive and more supportive efforts of people beyond the parent-teacher dyad. Swick (1991, p. 128) notes:

> Some of the factors that comprise various parent-teacher confrontations are not amenable to immediate resolution. Particular stressors may require long-term solutions such as therapy, rehabilitation, or combinations of strategies that may begin in the school but extend to the use of other helping professionals. Other elements that are embedded in the contexts of specific confrontations require a team approach where "third party" supporters such as school administrators or community leaders become involved in attempting to reshape the contexts toward resolution.

Part Six

INVOLVING PARENTS AND FAMILIES

A major goal of early childhood programs is or should be to organize and implement a comprehensive parent and family involvement program. There are differing ideas and conceptions of how to best organize and carry out parent and family involvement. What is missing in most programs is a framework by which the involvement process is planned, nurtured, and refined so that it is reflective of the talents, needs, and ideas of parents and professionals in the early childhood program. In proposing an *ecological approach,* Comer and Haynes (1991) suggest that the use of a "levels approach", where the different types of involvement (social, educational, support, decision making, and other types) are related to the desires, needs, and interests of parents, offers professionals a way of organizing the program's different activities. Epstein and Dauber (1991), for example, outline five different levels of involvement for parents. Included are many of the same levels that Comer suggests. The important point is that in organizing parent/family involvement we need to have a mental and structural framework for operationalizing it (Swick, 1991). *The key function of this part of the book is to provide such a framework.*

Chapter Twenty, for example, describes the evolving stages of the parent-teacher involvement process. The focus is on providing the reader with an understanding of how parent-teacher involvement *develops within the dynamics of the growth of both teachers and parents.* In too many cases, parents and teachers tend to see this involvement process as a static, straightforward arrangement. Yet, as the material shared in this chapter explains, the process is more developmental than most people realize—parents and teachers go through stages of development and so does a parent involvement program. The dynamics of this process are explored and related to the organization and implementation of an effective program.

Critical to the success of parent-teacher involvement efforts is the need for an organizational and implementation framework. Chapter Twenty One describes the basic components of a parent/family involvement framework. It includes a look at the manner in which the foundation of an effective program is articulated and the elements that comprise the planning and implementation process.

Chapter Twenty Two focuses on presenting information on *a plethora of parent/family involvement approaches.* In a sense, this is a smorgasbord chapter where many different techniques and strategies for achieving parent and family involvement are explored and discussed. This chapter, in addition to presenting strategies and techniques, provides ideas and activities for early childhood professionals to use in adapting these practices to their particular setting.

Schaefer (1991) suggests that the ultimate goal of parent involvement is the achievement of collaborative parent-teacher-child relationships. Chapter Twenty Three offers the reader ideas, strategies, and examples of how to achieve a more collaborative relationship with parents and families. Of particular concern is the need for engaging parents and teachers in collaborative efforts where they feel positive and supportive of each other. Traditionally, parent involvement has not emphasized the *parent as decision maker role*. Thus, this chapter provides many ideas and resources on how to best develop this aspect of parent and family involvement.

Chapter Twenty Four is devoted to evaluation and assessment tools that professionals can use in refining and improving parent/family involvement programs. Many programs suffer from the lack of continual review and development. Positive ways to achieve this important process of evaluation are explored. Finally, Chapter Twenty Five discusses the importance of creating family centered schools and programs. All early childhood professionals will want to seriously reflect on the goals and ideas shared in this chapter.

Chapter Twenty

PARENT-TEACHER INVOLVEMENT: A DEVELOPMENTAL PROCESS

On the surface, the active involvement of parents in their children's education (at home and in other contexts) appears to be an elementary process, one that should be easy to set in motion. As the experiences of many early childhood educators can support, the process is indeed very challenging and yet quite rewarding (Swick, 1984). Several sensitive variables need attention as well as a clear understanding of the way that relationships take place.

The focus throughout this book has been that parenting and parent involvement are developmental and ecological processes that best occur within environments that are supportive. In this regard, the focus here is on three elements of this developmental/ecological process: the multiple meanings of the concept of parent involvement, some key beginning points that parents and teachers need to address in their quest to have meaningful partnerships, and a look at a model for understanding how meaningful parent-teacher involvement efforts can be achieved. In many respects, the substance of the developmental perspective presented in this chapter is best represented in those parent-teacher partnerships where trust and mutuality are prevalent.

The Meanings of "Parent/Family Involvement"

There are many preconceptions that people have developed about the parent/family involvement process that are incorrect and often lead to conflicts between parents and teachers. For example, some teachers are very comfortable with parents helping them in classroom support roles but feel threatened when parents make overtures regarding becoming involved in decision making capacities (Schaefer, 1991). Likewise, many parents feel that the idea of "parent involvement" is for them to bake cookies and/or help out at special events. They are less confident in seeing themselves in the *parent as teacher role*. This limited (and often distorted) view of parent involvement is not confined to parents and teachers. In many cases citizens fail to see the roles they can play in a meaningful educational program (Chavkin, 1993). A close look at some of the major myths of parent and family involvement will help us to better understand the full meaning of the paradigm.

One myth is that parents must be physically active in school activities on a continuous basis. While this is a desirable and worthy goal, it is only one dimension of the concept. *The involvement process is developmental and inclusive*, beginning with the birth of the child and continuing throughout the life span of every family member (Galinsky, 1987). All of the roles that parents play (as well as teachers) contribute to the total meaning of parent/family involvement. A major undertaking at the outset of parent/family/teacher involvement planning should be the exploration of the multiple ways each contributes (or might contribute) to this comprehensive process. *It is also imperative that the roles that various family members play in this process be understood and integrated into the involvement process* (Comer & Haynes, 1991). The ever increasing diversity of families and parenting situations requires a much more culturally relevant view of parent/family involvement.

Another very damaging myth is that many parents, particularly those with different beliefs, lack the motivation to carry out their part of the involvement process (Chavkin, 1993; Lightfoot, 1978). Recent research, however, indicates that all parents want to participate in their children's education and are eager to become involved in parent-teacher partnership activities (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). Programs which cater to an elite group or are designed to meet only the needs of the school will obviously create little parental interest. On the other hand, programs that are developed with the needs of all parents in mind and are organized in flexible and useful ways attract practically all parents (Rich, 1987).

The myth that effective parent involvement programs are best designed by the "experts" has fostered distrustful parent-professional relationships. Powell (1989) and Schaefer (1991) note that the most effective parent and family involvement programs are the result of parent-directed activities and strong parent-professional partnership efforts. In fact a major weakness of programs in the past is their lack of responsiveness to parent and family needs. When parents have a say in the planning of programs, the ultimate details are more reality based and usually foster better participation among parents (Swick, 1991).

Another useless myth is that programs have activities happening all of the time and that a highly sophisticated system is needed for effectiveness (Swick, 1984). While it is very desirable to have a systematic approach to provide long-term continuity, this system need not be highly complex nor expensive. Comer (1986) shows how school-wide parent involvement programs, by capitalizing on the talents of everyone, can be systematic and yet efficient. Further, programs need not (and probably should not) have a constant array of activities to be effective. Swick (1984, p. 114) offers the following observation on this point:

> Well planned but properly sequenced activities are more desirable than having too many projects that have no meaning or logic. Program coordination, whether carried out by a parent coordinator or by a team of people, can be effective if goals are clearly defined and those involved in the process are willing to share the responsibilities of implementing the program.

A myth that has evolved from the "school dominated" concept of parent involvement is that all parent involvement activities must occur at school. Obviously this myth has been destroyed by the work of exemplary early childhood parent programs. Home visitation, interagency collaboration, and the use of various community settings to promote parent/family involvement have proven to be quite effective. The contexts of program involvement might include churches, private business, various work places, civic buildings, and indeed the homes of parents. As Davies (1991) notes, the move is actually toward extra-school, multidisciplinary settings.

As we gain a more comprehensive perspective on parent and family involvement, these myths are replaced with three basic constructs that promote a positive and viable system for parent-teacher partnerships.

First, ***parent involvement is a partnership between parents and teachers and their helpers in the community.*** This partnership must be based on the premise that the partners understand their individual roles, how these roles relate to the partnership process, and how the process of relating individual roles to the common good of the family-school-community relationship works. There must be a mutual respect among parents and teachers for the roles they each perform and an understanding of how to best use their talents in fostering quality learning environments for children and themselves (Swick, 1993).

Second, ***parent involvement is a developmental process that is built over a period of time through intentional planning and effort on the part of every team member*** (Swick, 1991). This process is developmental and begins through the formation of a trusting relationship among parents and teachers, and is continuously extended and expanded through mutually supportive activities that improve both the educational environment and the home-school relationship.

Third, ***parent involvement is a process by which parents and teachers work, learn, and participate in decision-making experiences in a shared***

manner (Davies, 1991). As parents and teachers develop their cooperative relationship they should find opportunities to learn from each other. This can occur through parent education programs or in less formal ways such as in parent-teacher discussion groups or in networking activities. What is critical is that parents and teachers value each other and recognize their mutual contributions to the partnership.

The parent involvement process is actualized through the performance of roles that teachers and parents carry out together. Swick (1991, p. 49) notes that:

> There are common roles that enable the partnership to materialize. These process roles provide the means by which parents and teachers can establish, nurture, and continually refine their partnership. These roles include: *collaboration, planning, communication,* and *evaluation.*

Collaboration is the core of the teacher-parent partnership process. It involves parents and teachers in working together on virtually all aspects of the growth process as it relates to the family-school learning ecology. It is a process by which parents expand the potential of children's environment as well as their own through continuous, planned interactions. Joint efforts by parents and teachers in *planning* the various elements of their partnership, both individual and common ventures related to the learning, doing, supporting, and nurturing roles, are essential to positive and meaningful relationships.

The growth process is rapid and intensive in children, parents, and teachers during the early childhood years; *communication* is the means by which parents and teachers support and enrich each other's growth. Examples of this communication are endless: daily interactions between teacher and parent, monthly newsletters, periodic phone calls, and regularly scheduled conferences. Feedback in the form of *continuing evaluation* allows this partnership to change as conditions, development, and needs require.

Authentic parent/family involvement efforts need to be based on the roles and concepts explicated in this part of the chapter. The significance of this process is too important to be left to the casual whims of people who feel that learning can occur without family-school planning.

Parent/Family Involvement: Points Of Beginning

Once parents and teachers have established a framework of understanding some common meanings regarding their relationship, they need to consider their readiness as related to proposed family-school involvement issues. *Three beginning reference points are:* philosophical basis of involvement, understanding of the communication process, and identification of some beginning points for developing the parent-teacher relationship (Swick, 1984).

Teachers, given their goal of providing children the best possible learning environment, *must consider their philosophy of teaching and learning in the largest context possible.* For example, teachers who view the learning process as basically confined to the classroom need to review their philosophy and knowledge regarding how children learn (Comer & Haynes, 1991). A similar assessment is needed in teachers who see parents as primarily their "helpers" and fail to recognize the interactional nature of this relationship. The following are the kinds of questions we need to ask as we shape our views of the parent/family involvement process.

- To whom am I as a teacher of young children personally and professionally responsible?
- Who is the child's first and potentially most influential teacher?
- How do I perceive the parents' role in the educational process?
- What steps have I taken to involve parents in a meaningful way in family-school efforts?
- Do I encourage parents to take an active interest in the school's program?

Parents face a similar task in confronting themselves with issues related to their various roles in creating positive relationships with teachers (Swick, 1984). Too often teachers and parents respond only to the immediate issues in their relationship. For example, parents of preschoolers may not see the significance of their educational role as it impacts the child's later school performance. Teachers may fail to see the critical need for keeping parents involved in this process. Thus, as parents ask themselves the following questions, they should gain new insight about their role in the family-school process.

- As a parent what are my key responsibilities both at home and at school?
- Who am I as I carry out my role as my child's most significant teacher?
- What kind of community is my child living in and what can I do to improve it?
- What means have I been using to pursue a positive relationship with my child's teacher?

Emerging from a study of these questions will be some *points of beginning* for the development of a functional parent-teacher and family-school partnership. In order to fully capitalize on these beginning points, *two areas of attention are needed by parents and teachers:* communication and planning skills. While these processes are explored in other parts of the book, they are reviewed here because of their critical role in making the parent/family involvement process effective.

The need for parent and citizen involvement can be articulated best by the development of a sound ***communication system***. This system needs to evolve from the continuing interaction and meaningful relationships of parents and teachers. The strength of the parent-teacher dyad feeds the overall communication environment of the school and the community (Swick, 1993). The development of parent and teacher ***planning skills*** can be accomplished through the involvement of parents and teachers in shared training sessions as well as in guided planning activities (Comer & Haynes, 1991).

Ultimately, teachers and parents need to pursue the planning and development of their partnership with proactive perspectives and strategies. The following are questions that parents and teachers need to study as they work toward having a meaningful partnership and involvement process.

- What is the history of parent-teacher and family-school relationships in our community? For example, have parents and teachers worked together in the past? Have these experiences been positive? If not, why?
- Is there a core group of people (parents and teachers) who can take the leadership in starting up the process of parent/family involvement? If not, how can the process be initiated? What resources and strategies can best facilitate this process?
- What should be the major focus of the parent and family involvement effort? What needs are of major concern to parents and to teachers?

A Developmental Model Of Nurturing Parent-Teacher Relationships

Too often parent-teacher relationships are viewed in a simplistic and static perspective. Yet, even the casual observer notices the dynamics of the interaction between teachers and parents, the complexities of the actions and reactions of teachers and parents to each other's ideas, behaviors, and relationship patterns (Galinsky, 1990). *Four facets of the parent-teacher relationship need continuing attention:* the meaning of the term developmental as applied to parent-teacher relationships, the nature of "developmental stages" of parenting and teaching, the substance of the stages of parent-teacher relationships, and the use of developmental information on parent-teacher relationships as applied to organizing effective parent/family involvement programs. Each facet of the parent-teacher relationship process is explored within the belief that the most viable partnerships emerge from developmentally sound actions.

The concept of development implies that human beings change and refine their selves as they interact with the environment, particularly when these interactions are intentional and of a proactive nature (Garbarino, 1982). The philosophy of parent and family involvement presented in this book is based on the premise: *that individuals can use their experiences to improve themselves, altering behavior patterns where necessary and refining skills with information and perceptions acquired by reflecting on experiences in their lives.* This concept can be applied to the study of various human relationships, particularly the relationships inherent in the family-school partnership.

In reference to parent-teacher relationships, the construct of development connotes the process by which each learns from the other and utilizes their experience base in enhancing the overall family-school relationship. For example, many parents recognize the new insights about their children that they gain from their children's teachers. Likewise, teachers often comment on how parents are helpful in sharing information on the child's past development and/or current behavior in the home. This process includes the individual developmental changes that parents and teachers experience as well as the changes that occur in their relating to each other. The most obvious instances include parent-teacher conferencing, working on program improvement together, and helping each other gain insights on a problem the child is experiencing (Schaefer, 1982). Clearly, it is important *that parents and teachers see their relationship as developmental.*

An inherent aspect of the developmental view of parent-teacher relationships *is the premise that parents and teachers can, through intentional effort, build a relationship that is continuously growing, expanding, and refining itself* regarding productive interactions with all members of the family-school team (Swick, 1984). This view, then, does not accept the static idea that parents are unable to develop into full partners in the family-school learning process. Rather, this perspective sees each parent as an individual capable of growth, able to develop their skills in an interactive manner when the school climate and family support system are oriented toward facilitating both parent and teacher potential. The perspective of the developing partnership presented here is best reflected in the following (Swick, 1991, p. 123):

> Ultimately, the most powerful learning that occurs during the early childhood years may well be the learning that goes on between parent and teacher. For it is the parent and teacher roles that carry the most significance for the child's lifelong learning. Thus, these years are an opportune time for teachers to initiate and then build partnerships that reflect shared decision making, to encourage parent initiatives regarding their involvement in family and school activities, and to begin the process of shared leadership with parents.

Critical to the full development of this concept of involvement is the realization that parents and teachers are the most powerful teachers children will ever encounter. Thus, ***the developing parent and teacher*** can foster a setting where children can develop their potential to the maximum. The impact of adult modeling is seen in both positive and negative influences on children. Magid & McKelvey (1988) describe the negative outcomes of detachment and severe neglect, where children never have the opportunity to bond with their parents. The many facets of Antisocial Personality Syndrome such as extreme aggression, constant withdrawing from reality, and the ultimate failure to develop a conscience are partially the failure of adults to model attachment behaviors. The positive outcomes such as learning to care for others, problem solve, and engaging in productive social relationships are indicative of a proactive and emotionally rich relationship between parent and child (Erikson, 1982). It is critical that planners of parent/family involvement programs recognize the importance of the *modeling role that parents and teachers carry out in their relationships with children.* Thus, it is also critical that the developmental nature of parent and teacher development and their interactive relationship be recognized and acted upon in the planning of partnership efforts.

Parents and teachers each experience a series of developmental levels by which they can strengthen their individual integrity, which in turn enables them to be more effective partners in family-school efforts (Swick, 1984). A full understanding of the individual developmental experiences of parents and teachers is essential to then utilizing parent and teacher abilities to the maximum.

Parents, beginning with their plans to become parents, are in a state of continuous development (LaRossa, 1986). Parents must find ways to experience continuing growth in their roles as nurturers of children; otherwise, they would atrophy. Parental development is (or can be) a part of the person's total adult development. There are several theoretical and applied perspectives regarding the development of parents and families (Eklund, 1980; Erikson, 1982; Duvall, 1977; Galinsky, 1987; Jaffe & Viertel, 1980; LaRossa, 1986). A synthesis of these views provides us with a framework of the developing parent within a *stages construct.* These stages might be conceptualized as follows: pre-parenting, initial parenting period, the organization of a parenting pattern, refinement period, and stabilization period. Just as the child's later development is heavily influenced by what happens during the earliest periods of life, so it is with parental development. Highly stressful beginnings that prevent parents from experiencing the bonding and proactive nature of family life can create a foundation for poor parenting and ultimately have a devastating effect on children (White, 1988).

Defined broadly, the preparenting preparation stage of parenting includes all of the experiences an individual has integrated into his or her personality up to the point of becoming a parent. In a more functional sense it deals with the specific experiences an individual uses to prepare for becoming a parent. These preparatory experiences include formal courses in parenting and many informal (but most significant) discussions and experiences regarding care of the infant, planning the caregiving environment, taking care of self as a parent, and related topics such as adjustments in work life and social life (Galinsky, 1987). This is the period of parenting that is devoted to planning and preparing for a major life change that is emerging with the realities of becoming a parent.

Initial parenting experiences include the actual parent involvement activities performed during the child's first year of life (Jaffe & Viertel, 1980). This is an exploratory time where parents (particularly first time parents) experiment with different approaches to handling the various roles of infant care, adjusting life patterns, organizing new social relationships, refining marital relationships, and handling many other life adjustments. Critical to this period is the formation of loving and nurturing relationships with the infant. This calls for the use of many relationship behaviors that have been developed throughout the parent's life history. It also calls for a highly supportive environment, particularly among marital and kin support relationships (LaRossa, 1986). Early parent involvement behaviors are formed during this period. A strong relationship exists between what parents do with infants and each other during this period of parenting development and how they relate to their children and teachers in later parent involvement experiences (Schaefer, 1985).

During the second year of parenting, parents begin the process of more formally ***organizing their parenting system*** in relation to new social, personal, and work arrangements (Galinsky, 1987). While this process was underway during the first year of parenting, it now takes on more urgency with the emerging development of the infant and *with the emerging development of the parent*. Work-family schedules are now beginning to take on some regularity, internal family rituals are gaining some continuity, and daily family living is acquiring some stability—given that parents have consciously been pursuing these practices. As parents arrive at a new scheme of living, they see the "family system" in a more consolidated manner, now planning and anticipating issues, activities, and stressors that were not obvious a year ago (Jaffe & Viertel, 1980). Areas of parenting and family life that were all-consuming initially are now becoming more routine in the sense that they are viewed as a part of life. This process of organization of parenting and family life patterns continues throughout the preschool years, with parents refining and adapting the family's structure and system with changes in development and in the environment (Kotre & Hall, 1990).

As children enter the formal school years parents tend ***to refine their performance of different roles and take on new roles*** in regards to family and family-related responsibilities (Jaffe & Viertel, 1980). For example, as the child gains confidence and some autonomy in handling certain tasks parents may shift some of their focus to extra-family contexts where the child is developing such as the school or community. Further, parents now refine their relationship with the child, interacting with her in more authoritative and interpretive modes (Galinsky, 1987). Parents, particularly if they have been intimately involved with their child during the preschool period, are now knowledgeable about the child's personality and behavior and can thus make judgments about when and how to guide the child's habits. They also function in more interpretive modes, helping children understand the environment. As parents take on these new roles, *they look to teachers and other support people for assistance and guidance* (Swick, 1987).

As the total family develops during the early school years, most parents ***stabilize their parenting and family style*** (Duvall, 1977). With the development of a more mature child, parents can release some of the more mundane tasks and turn their energy toward the most critical roles such as continuing to nurture self-confidence in the child and guiding the child toward proactive ways of living. Continued refinements occur over the life span but the basic direction and style of parent-child and family living have been internalized by parents and children.

Not all parents engage in parenting in a developmental sequence, at least as it has been delineated in this part of the chapter. Some parents, for various reasons, engage in recursive, dysfunctional behavior patterns and never actually experience the growth process. Other parents may form closure on their parenting orientation and thus function in a rigid manner—disavowing developmental opportunities and responding in a static manner to their child's development and their own development. Ideally, parents use developmental opportunities to learn productive modes of relating to children, teachers, and their spouse or friends.

Teachers develop in their personal and professional interactions given a supportive environment in which they can explore and learn. The initial stage of teacher development *takes place in the preservice education program.* Within a college or university setting (or within a child care training program) teachers develop a knowledge base and practice some basic teaching skills. A second stage of teacher development involves the developing professional in an internship type of experience. The depth of this stage will vary according to the situation each individual experiences. Hopefully, they learn about the ecology of teaching and how to relate to it in an effective and growing way. When they have role models who promote a developmental approach to professional growth, the experience is invaluable and far reaching. Unfortunately, too often young teachers are left to their own resources which may or may not suffice to support their needed growth (Katz, 1977).

When teachers experience success in their early teaching experiences they tend to establish wholistic and sensitive attributes as related to nurturing children and parents. Over a period of years they do sense the need for renewal. This might be called the renewal state of teacher development since it involves re-thinking and re-shaping one's views, strategies, and instructional approaches. Leland Jacobs (1978) called this the foundation upon which the artistic teacher can and often does shape a more harmonious and challenging style of teaching. Once a philosophical base has been formed and refined, the process of stabilizing one's teaching approach is a logical goal. This has often been called the mastery stage of teacher development. It is during this phase of teaching that the professional integrates theory, research, and practice into a highly effective teaching and learning system. This growing stage of teaching should not be confused with rigidification of teacher behaviors. It is just the opposite! It involves the teacher in taking on new challenges and new roles. Advocacy, mentoring, and curriculum leadership are natural outcomes of the work of master teachers. Their insights into parent-teacher relationships are more sensitive and responsive. The further development of the experienced teacher is a natural extension of the process she or he has established during this stage. Indeed, as teachers acquire the larger picture of the teaching and learning ecology they refine and expand their understanding of all aspects of this system.

The developing teacher and parent are not simply passing through stages of human development and professional growth; they are experiencing them in individually unique ways. The key to their development is in their intentional and thoughtful action regarding how they relate and react to the children they parent and teach and to each other in their partnership activities (Swick, 1991). ***Adults who atrophy in their life perspectives are unable to teach or learn effectively because they have become disconnected from the developmental process.*** In order to be generative in human endeavors one must be actively engaged in the human development process (Erikson, 1982). In order for teachers and parents to develop meaningful relationships they must be considerate of each other's development and ecological contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The following are **insights regarding the developmental nature of parent-teacher relationships.**

The development of parent-teacher relationships takes shape in many different ways. In some cases no authentic relationship is ever established and in other situations a highly elaborate and supportive partnership is developed. The relationship development process is intentional and under supportive conditions it usually occurs in five stages (Swick, 1984).

The first stage of development is a time in which initial contact between teacher and parent is established. Ideally, this occurs before the child enters school or child care. *It is a time for learning that parent and teacher are in need of having a partnership.* The recognition that they have a common goal of nurturing children toward healthy and meaningful development and learning is established. The realization that as partners they can accomplish more than they would in isolated, individual modes is also a part of this process.

Once the initial rationale for their partnership is established, parents and teachers begin to explore the common basis for their relationship. This is the second stage of development. Depending on where the parent and teacher are at in their own personal development, the partnership process takes on different meaning and style. For example, in preschool programs, parent-teacher efforts may be directed toward preventing problems in terms of the child's healthy development. *During this stage many parents use the teacher as a consultant on various issues like appropriate learning experiences for the child, proper expectations for child behavior, and ideas on meaningful home learning activities* (Rich, 1987). Teachers may inquire about the child's behavior at home and encourage parents to become involved in the child's learning activities at school. This stage of involvement is also a time when parents and teachers begin to develop the framework for how they plan to work with each other (Swick, 1991).

During the third stage of development parents and teachers formulate their relationship by establishing a system by which they can carry out continuous communication and interaction. *Various modes of relating to each other are used: conferencing, home visits, written and telephone messages, and joint activities like parent education programs.* These opportunities for interaction usually lead to the formation of trusting and beneficial relationships. As parent-teacher relationships are strengthened, the fourth stage of development occurs. It is during this stage that formal problem solving, advocacy projects, and other more formal activities are carried out by parents and teachers. *This is a very refined period of development in that parents and teachers feel confidence in utilizing each other as resources and in seriously considering each others' ideas about child development and teaching.*

The fifth stage of development is a natural extension of the previous stage. *It is a time when parents and teachers enrich their relationship through developing common interests regarding the quality of the family and school activities children experience.* The parent-teacher relationship is solidified and refined with a respect for each others' own developmental status. A mutuality is accomplished where parent supports teacher and teacher actively seeks out ways to enhance the parent in her attempts to function. *This mutuality is* *extended to include the needs of other parents and teachers.* Typically, parents and teachers who mature to this stage of functioning are strong advocates for having quality educational and social support programs for all families.

These stages of development are symbolic of what can occur in the evolving parent-teacher relationship when both parties are intentionally seeking a growth oriented relationship. Yet, in many cases the developing relationship described here does not happen. The real value of the developmental model is in its projection of how parents and teachers can establish a growing and meaningful relationship. For example, teachers and parents can improve the parent involvement process by applying the basic concepts of this model. By seeing the relationship process in a developmental and ecological mode, parents and teachers can construct a more viable partnership.

Chapter Twenty One

A FRAMEWORK FOR PARENT/FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

Once teachers and parents have developed a foundation of trust and understanding for having meaningful relationships, an empathetic-ecological framework that includes the use of effective strategies can promote involvement activities that support their partnership. This framework needs to be supported by philosophical premises such as the following.

1. Teachers and parents must have a sense of respect for each others' integrity, for their abilities to grow and develop in positive ways as individuals and within their respective roles (Jaffe & Viertel, 1980).
2. Teachers must be sensitive to the possible limitation of their orientation toward parents as it may have evolved within a deficit oriented system (Lightfoot, 1978).
3. Parents must be cognizant of the dynamic role of teachers as it relates to planning and carrying out good quality early learning programs (Anastasiow, 1988).
4. Teachers and parents must recognize and respond to the serious limitations in the ways that schools are often structured, thus focusing on creating more responsive school settings (Swick, 1991).
5. Parents and teachers must articulate and actualize a commitment to carrying out the needed planning, dialogue, and responsive involvement essential to their partnership (Swick & Duff, 1978).
6. Teachers and parents must continually strive to become "children's advocates" through the important roles of nurturing, teaching, and guiding (Swick, 1984).

When these philosophical premises are respected and acted on, indicators of an authentic partnership such as the following are usually present.

1. Parents and teachers work toward common goals in a mutually supportive way.

2. Teachers involve parents in curriculum decision making and improvement efforts.

3. Parents and teachers communicate on problems and concerns in an open and honest fashion.

4. Teachers and parents participate in shared learning experiences and benefit from each other's ideas.

5. Parents and teachers engage in helping roles that strengthen both the classroom and the home learning ecologies.

An Empathetic-Ecological Framework

Building upon the understanding that teacher-parent partnerships are developmental in nature and that an empathetic-ecological approach is most conducive to achieving strong partnerships, a framework for organizing, supporting, and carrying out the process is essential (Swick, 1984). The following are elements that function as subtle yet powerful influences on the more logistical parts of the framework: *Teacher Bases* and *Parent Bases* (Swick, 1991).

Teacher Bases include three elements: perspective, context, and role understanding. Teacher perspective is inclusive of the attitudinal focus of the teacher regarding parent and family involvement. It is the image that a teacher has about how they hope to involve parents and families in the teaching and learning process. It is based on Teacher Context and Teacher Role Understanding. Context includes all of the personal and professional factors that influence what and how a teacher can function with regards to parent and family involvement. Teacher assessment of this element is crucial to their shaping a realistic and viable approach to using the tools of the framework in the parent and family involvement process. Likewise, teacher understanding of their roles in the involvement process is important to the way in which they form relationships with parents.

Parent Bases include three elements: perspective, context, and role understanding. Parent Perspective involves the attitudinal focus of the parent toward both their involvement in the child's total development and their specific involvement with the child's teacher and school. Parent Context is comprised of those factors that influence what and how parents get involved

A Parent/Family Involvement Framework

Teacher Bases	Parent Bases
Perspective	Perspective
Context	Context
Role Understanding	Role Understanding

Planning Process

Needs Assessment
Goals/Objectives
Setting Priorities
Selecting Strategies
Organizing Resources
Designing Implementation
Continual Assessment

Implementation Strategies

Dialogue As Foundation
Conferencing
Home Visiting
Parent/Teacher Learning
Involvement Through Technology
Home Learning Strategies
Family Education Centers
In-Classroom Involvement
Group Meetings/Seminars
Other

Evaluation Activities

Feedback
Refinement

with teachers and children. Parent Role Understanding includes the views that a parent has about the proper way for them to be involved with teachers and schools. These elements combine to strongly influence the manner in which parents relate to teachers and schools.

It is critical that teachers and parents assess these influential elements because they are continuous parts of the involvement process. For example, the parent who views the educational process as the sole responsibility of the school will need a great deal of educational and support attention before they will consider the partnership endeavor as important (Swick, 1984). In a similar manner, teachers who view the involvement process in limited ways may not invite parents to participate in decision making roles. Yet it is critical that any partnership process be mutually inclusive of all of the parties involved. *Only when teachers and parents have engaged in assessment of their involvement philosophy and focus can the following framework components be useful.*

The framework includes three phases: planning, implementation, and evaluation. Each phase is briefly described and discussed as follows.

Planning Process. The planning process includes: needs assessment, setting goals and objectives, establishing priorities, selecting strategies, organizing resources, designing implementation activities, and carrying out continual assessment.

Needs Assessment provides the rationale, purpose, and perspective for the shaping of a meaningful parent and family involvement plan. It provides the arena for promoting partnership activities that are both relevant and supportive of long-term goals. It should engage teachers and parents in situations where they examine their individual and common perspectives, roles, and desired outcomes (Weiss & Jacobs, 1988). This process can occur in several modes: group meetings, study teams, questionnaires, informal discussions, conferences, home visits, through shared learning activities, and through many other means. *Through continuing discussion, teacher and parent perspectives can begin to emerge as a partial basis for needs identification.* As Swick (1984, p. 126) notes, acquiring representative parent perspectives is important.

> Regardless of the type of assessment used it is vital that information be gathered on how parents perceive their needs in relation to the school. As the data gathering process is being conducted the people involved need to be sure they are acquiring the views of a cross-section of parents in the community.

The following example of perspective statements developed by teachers and parents is one indicator of how this process works.

Teacher Perspective	Parent Perspective
Provide children with a stimulating supportive learning environment.	Support our children in being successful learners.
Communicate with parents on my clear expectations regarding the children's behavior and habits.	Communicate with our children about appropriate behaviors for successful learning.
Provide the family with a context in the classroom that is inviting, orderly, and responsive.	Support the teacher by providing our children with a positive learning environment at home.

Teacher-Parent Perspectives

Engage in joint planning and doing activities that enrich both the classroom and the home learning environment.

Offer each other support to better carry out our teaching and nurturing roles.

Participate in continuing communication activities that positively and yet realistically strengthen the parent-teacher partnership.

Through perspective taking, parents and teachers can shape an agenda of need-areas that reflect their individual and common concerns. Areas typically included in such assessments are learning needs unique to individual teacher and parent perceptions; support roles and activities that each can help with; program needs (early childhood curriculum, facilities, resources); communication needs; planning and decision-making needs; and implementation issues (Cataldo, 1987).

The needs assessment process also provides teachers and other school leaders with an excellent opportunity to examine their orientation to the parent and family involvement process (Swick, 1991). It is critical for teachers (and other school staff) to periodically review their attitudes and knowledge-base regarding the parent and family involvement process. Further, this review needs to include a look at the resources needed to carry out effective programs (Epstein, 1991).

Goals, Objectives, and Prioritizing Needs are interrelated processes that help shape the agenda for the involvement process. An initial step in the process is to cluster identified needs into categories that represent a common purpose. For example, the Minnesota Early Learning and Development program found that parents had a common need for basic child development, parenting, and family living information (Engstrom, 1988). Rich (1987, 1988), in her work at the Home and School Institute, found that parents of young children had a common interest in knowing what was expected by the teacher, what behavior guidelines were expected of the children, and when and how they were to communicate with the teacher. This cluster of needs could easily be organized into a parent-teacher communication category. Likewise, the teacher may have specific needs that can be related to an involvement/decision making cluster. For example, needs may exist for parent volunteers to help with special events, parent representation on program planning teams, and parent-teacher dialogue on special issues related to the learning program (Epstein, 1985).

Once need-clusters have been organized, parent-teacher planning should focus on setting priorities. Given the realities of limited resources, prioritizing can support the goal of having a partnership vision that includes both immediate and long-range goals. This process is more than a formal system of rank-ordering needs; it requires the sensitive response of teachers to the expressed and observed needs of everyone involved in the teaching-learning process. For example, informal parent interactions provide valuable feedback on their perceptions of priorities that may not emerge within formal planning groups (Powell, 1989). Through the use of multiple assessment and feedback modes the teacher-parent team can articulate priorities like the following.

Parent-Teacher Program Needs

High Priority

- Establish better teacher/parent communication.
- Involve the community more in classroom projects.
- Develop an extended-day enrichment program.
- Organize a child development program for 3- and 4-year olds.

Long-Range Priorities

- Form a summer enrichment program for families.
- Organize a classroom-based teacher/parent planning team.
- Develop a parent volunteer program.

Partnership objectives take on meaning as they emerge through this needs-setting process. Critical to the success of this process, however, is the development of a sense of mutuality among parents and teachers. The learning process should be seen not only as a partnership but it should also be actively pursued in this manner. In addition, stated objectives should provide the framework for teachers and parents to pursue activities they both support. The communication and feedback process also provides for continuing refinements in plans as well as a means for clarifying the roles and functions of everyone involved (Swick, 1984).

Selecting strategies that are best suited to achieving stated goals and objectives requires a careful review of various program-participant issues. Finding a match between needs and strategies is a process that each team of parents and teachers will carry out in relationship to their particular context. For example, in a recent analysis of a statewide parent education program Swick (1993) noted that even within a single project varied strategies were needed to meet the different needs of parent populations. In an earlier study Swick (1992) found that three different schools who had the same parent involvement goals used different strategies because of local needs. Some of the examples Swick (1992) noted in that study are:

- One classroom found tremendous success with conferences; parents not only responded positively to this strategy but extended their involvement by requesting follow-up contacts.
- Another classroom (in another district) had more success with home visits and informal teacher-parent contacts than with other strategies. The teachers observed that because of the rural setting most parents wanted the home visits and telephone contacts.
- In-classroom involvement proved very successful in a classroom that was located in a small, intimate kindergarten primary school. Parents lived close to the school and were very close emotionally to the staff and the history of the school.

An important observation made in this study was that parents who were offered multiple opportunities for involvement increased their contacts and interaction with teachers. This broader approach to parent involvement increased teacher sensitivity to the potential for using more parent involvement strategies.

There are many strategies to use in the involvement process. Swick (1984, p. 129) provides a sample of how needs and strategies might be more closely matched.

Family-School Needs	Possible Strategies
•Problem solving •Sharing information •Confidential situations	•Conferencing •Newsletters
•Personal support •Common concerns •Parent education	•Group conferences •Seminars •Study teams
•Relating to family •Modeling for parents •Modeling for children •Parent education	•Home visits
•Parent literacy •Parent-child learning •Family learning	•Computer technology
•Information sharing •Involvement mode •Announcements	•Newsletters •Two-way memos •Telephone contacts
•Assessing needs •Determining interests •Evaluating programs	•Questionnaires •Inventories
•Parent education •Citizen involvement •Awareness activities	•Interactive television •Video-taped programs

Implementation Process. The implementation process includes various strategies and delivery systems. Chapter Twenty Two provides the reader with a comprehensive review of strategies like conferencing, home visiting, group meetings, home learning activities, in-classroom involvement, and other strategies. It is the implementation issues that are reviewed and discussed at this point.

Through the advanced and continuing review of various implementation issues, many problems can be prevented. Questions such as the following are helpful in shaping an implementation process that is effective.

1. Are program activities reflective of the needs that emerged through formal and informal teacher-parent planning opportunities?

2. Are the planned activities well organized, with particular people assigned to handle needed tasks for making them successful?

3. Have the program activities been planned at times convenient for parental participation and have notices of the plans been sent to parents?

4. Are the resources needed for carrying out various activities available and organized for use?

Some programs have found it useful to develop *an implementation checklist for the parent/family involvement program.*

Implementation Checklist

____ Needs assessment of priority parent involvement concerns and ideas has been conducted.

____ Parents have been involved in the needs assessment and goal setting process.

____ Needs identified have been sequenced in rank order indicating high priority, low priority, long-range and short-range goals.

____ Specific program objectives have been developed with input from all members of the learning team.

____ Program objective and corresponding activities have been advertised throughout the community.

____ Appropriate implementation strategies have been selected to support the various components of the program.

____ All individuals involved in implementing the program have been contacted, oriented to their tasks and provided resources to carry out their role.

____ Facilities needed for implementation have been readied and scheduled for use with all responsible people notified.

____ A process for evaluating and improving the program on a continuous basis has been designed.

Problems that arise during the implementation process can be more easily resolved or even prevented when appropriate guidelines exist. Early childhood educators will find the following suggestions helpful in this regard (Swick, 1984, p. 132).

1. Develop programs with local family and school needs as the basis for decision making. While school districts may have a district wide program philosophy, it is best to locate actual program planning at the school building level.

2. Involve a cross-section of parents, teachers, and citizens in the planning process. In order to have a meaningful planning process each school or program site will want to develop a procedural approach for carrying out this process.

3. Organize program activities in conjunction with other community agencies. Interagency and community collaboration can strengthen the total program.

4. Plan experiences where the staff benefit from the ideas of others through visitations to other programs and through forming study and discussion teams.

5. Involve parents and staff in the coordination of program activities. The use of parent-teacher collaboration can provide on-going experiences in leadership development, thus assuring continuous availability of trained personnel in carrying out program operations.

Evaluation Process. A comprehensive treatment of the evaluation component is provided in Chapter Twenty Four. Here the focus is on the basic elements of the evaluation process as it occurs within the parent/family involvement framework.

Assessment and refinement of parent and family involvement activities are essential to the continuing growth and improvement of the program. Feedback, renewal of goals and leadership structures, and extension of parent-teacher efforts are vital to successful programs (Weiss & Jacobs, 1988). Formal and informal means of evaluation and assessment provide the needed breadth to this aspect of program development. Critical to this process is teacher-parent dialogue that is proactive in attempting to continually refine program efforts.

For example, *informal comments and brief narrative reports from participants provide information on the perceptions of the value of various* *program activities.* Some program leaders have found individualized activity reports from each participant to be helpful in organizing and improving future efforts (Swick, 1984). These reports may be simple checklists or narrative comments from the participants (Hanes, 1977).

Another technique is to use annual program assessments. These assessments ask parents and staff to evaluate the individual program activities offered during the year. The goal of such assessments is to find out how the planners and participants see the value and effectiveness of the activities delivered during that year. It is also a good way to acquire parent and staff ideas on ways to improve the program. Additional modes of program evaluation include open forum discussions, formal assessment inventories, and teacher-parent study teams (Powell, 1989).

Ultimately, the purpose of the evaluation process is to strengthen the family-school system as a learning medium. Program leaders and participants need to periodically review questions such as: Were the objectives accomplished? Were family-school relationships improved? What specific activities and outcomes resulted from the program design? Of related concern are the issues involved in staff performance, interagency functioning, parent participation, and the areas identified for improvement (Swick, 1991).

Examples of Effective Parent/Family Involvement Frameworks

Successful early childhood parent/family involvement programs are characterized by their focus on enhancing the quality of early learning and development. *It is in the mission and the process that exemplary programs are born, not in the packaging—nor even in the housing of such efforts.* Programs that have focused on the preschool years like Parents As Teachers and Family Resource Centers as well as others have exemplary attributes such as their comprehensiveness, parent-centered decision making strategies, and the useful learning activities they have generated (Weiss & Jacobs, 1988). The following are two examples of kindergarten-primary grade program efforts that deserve attention for their very functional designs.

A Rural Partnership for School Success. Developed with the support of a U.S. Office of Education FIRST Grant, this program had the very specific mission of enhancing the school success of at risk kindergarten and primary grade children through strengthening the teacher-parent dyad and increasing parent involvement in their children's education (Swick, 1992). The central focus of the program was to provide a comprehensive learning system in which teachers, parents, and home-school-workers acquired a variety of skills to strengthen their individual and collaborative efforts in supporting children's learning in school and at home. *The design engaged teachers and home-school-workers (paraprofessionals who received special training) in efforts to involve parents of children who were academically at risk in training and activities that would strengthen their position as teachers of their children at home and in classroom contexts* (Swick, 1992).

Major partnership-building strategies used in the project were home visits, parent training programs, conferences, home learning activities, in-classroom involvement of parents, a computer home loan program, take-home videotaped parenting programs, and informal involvement activities.

Throughout the project an effort was made to bring parents into close contact with their children and their children's teacher(s) in learning situations that directly related to the children's success. For example, when the children were dealing with a concept like learning to share in the classroom, home learning materials were matched with the concept for use at home. *The matching of classroom learning emphases and home learning activities proved highly successful;* it was a way that all parents could get involved. One of the most popular activities as noted by parents and staff was the shared learning of parents and children on the computer activities.

Findings from the project suggest that by involving parents early in their children's school and education, the parent-child partnership approach to learning is better internalized by parents. Further, these same findings point out that this early involvement of parents and teachers can lead to long term supportive and trusting relationships.

Another insight worth noting was the observation that a diversity of parent and teacher involvement strategies did increase the levels of parent involvement in children's education (Swick, 1992). Additional insights that emerged from the program (and have the support of other research) include: parent participation rates in school or classroom activities increase when support resources such as child care and transportation are available; teacher initiatives regarding partnership-building increase with training and school support resources; diversity of parent involvement strategies is especially influential in stimulating parents who traditionally remain uninvolved to get involved; the presence of fully trained paraprofessionals in home-school roles strengthened and extended the involvement possibilities of the school; and the involvement of parents in program support roles increased their perceptions of themselves as capable people (Epstein, 1984; Powell, 1989; Swick, 1992).

Learning Goes Home. The "Learning Goes Home" approach evolved from the work at the Home and School Institute (HSI) by Dorothy Rich and others (Rich, 1987, 1988). The basis for this approach is the *Parent As Teacher* or *Parent As Tutor* idea. Inherent in this design is the recognition that parent-teacher partnerships are best initiated through activities that emanate from children's learning as it occurs within the classroom. Rich (1987, p. 57) states:

> The involvement of parents in the education of their own children means building a program as it should be built, from the bottom up, rather than from the top down. It creates a foundation of support and commitment for other kinds of involvement efforts. It may also obviate the need for many other kinds of public relations efforts as families begin to understand what is really involved in the education of their children.

Further, this approach is based on assumptions that all families are in a position to become meaningfully engaged in school and home learning efforts:

- All children have experiences that are meaningful to them; some children's experiences are simply different.
- Home environments, no matter how poor, are places of care and concern for children.
- All parents have the abilities, when properly supported, to help their child succeed in school.
- Family potential can be readily activated into practical support for children and schools.
- Teachers in search of promoting parent involvement should start with family strengths, not with their deficits.
- All teachers can initiate some form of positive home learning through positive relationships with parents.

The learning-goes-home approach is best realized when it is initiated during the family's formative experiences with school. It enables parents and children to see and actualize a supportive learning role of what occurs in the school through complementary learning efforts at home. It also encourages families to see education as a shared responsibility (Rich, 1987).

A key strategy used in this approach is the *Home Learning Recipe*. "Recipes" are specific, practical, no-cost activities for learning at home.

During the early childhood years these recipes focus on experiences parents and children can carry out within their natural contexts of living: cooking activities, sharing of books and magazines, story-telling, family sharing times, and many other activities. The goal of these experiences is to build healthy family relationships and a foundation for skills for school success. Various school and community groups have used the HSI design or adapted it to their situation with success.

Based upon the success of the HSI approach, Rich (1988) further refined the model with the development of *MegaSkills*. In a sense, these are skills that are needed before children can fully engage in the acquisition of school-based skills. As Rich (1988, p. 90) states:

> It is generally agreed that children need certain basic skills (usually called the three R's) in order to succeed in school. But, for children to learn these basic skills at school, they need to learn another important set of basics at home. I call these "MegaSkills." This is the curriculum that is taught at home. It's reinforced in the classroom, but, mostly it has to be taught by the family.

These Megaskills include the behaviors, attitudes, and constructs that children need in order to be full partners in the learning process. Rich's (1988) MegaSkills include: Confidence, Motivation, Effort, Responsibility, Initiative, Perseverance, Caring, Teamwork, Competition, Common Sense, and Problem Solving. Through a design that is built around appropriate activities for varying developmental and age ranges, one can build an early childhood MegaSkills curriculum for the home.

Research on the learning goes home design has indicated a high level of success (Rich, 1988). A synthesis of the findings indicate that family participation rates typically range from 60 to 90 percent; teachers have consistently reported that parents who participate in HSI-supported programs have become more involved in multiple aspects of their children's education; participating parents report various personal indicators that reflect a strengthening of their self-image; school administrators see the program as highly valuable; and parents and teachers have observed children's school performance to improve (Rich, 1987, 1988).

The two projects described have some common strengths: they focused on something specific to the child's learning; each used a diversity of resources and strategies in involving parents; the focus of each program was on something positive parents and teachers could pursue; they involved parents in the planning and assessment process; each addressed the unique concerns of the families they were serving; and they fostered attitudes and activities that encouraged long-term partnerships. Parent and family involvement frameworks that foster supportive and responsive parent-teacher relationships do improve the ecology of learning and development for everyone.

Chapter Twenty Two

PARENT/FAMILY INVOLVEMENT: A PLETHORA OF APPROACHES

There are many different approaches to involving parents and families in the early childhood program. Various ways of organizing these approaches have been used to provide a system for usage and assessment. Two arrangements are shared in this chapter. One focuses on the types of involvement used to achieve parent participation. The other arrangement focuses on the methods used to involve parents. The major intent of the material presented in this chapter is to provide early childhood educators with a plethora of ideas and strategies for involving parents in their children's education and development.

Types of Involvement Tasks

One way of organizing approaches to parent and family involvement is through the types of involvement tasks in which parents are invited to participate. *Five types of involvement tasks* are described in this section of the chapter: Assistance Tasks, Resource Tasks, Shared Learning Tasks, Decision Making Tasks, and Advocacy Tasks. Each type of involvement is described and examples are shared to highlight how parents are involved.

Assistance Tasks. Early childhood educators have a long history of involving parents through the use of many different assistance tasks. The key to this type of involvement is that parents and teachers need to recognize that the concept of assistance should be a mutually beneficial process (Swick, 1984). That is, parents and teachers need to be of help to each other. The following are some examples of how this involvement process might work.

- Parents help out with clerical tasks such as attendance records and monthly reports.

- Teachers help parents acquire ideas on solving various family needs.

- Parents serve as home-room or classroom coordinators for facilitating the involvement of other parents.

- Teachers help parents develop networking groups to support each other in the parenting process.

- Parents help in carrying out field trips and in organizing special events in the classroom.

- Teachers assist parents in developing effective home learning arrangements.

- Parents (with training and guidance) work with small groups of children on various instructional activities.

- Teachers support parents in finding needed family literacy materials and activities.

- Parents help out with tutoring and other individualized teaching activities in the classroom.

- Teachers provide parents with suggestions on parent-child communication with the emphasis on positive discipline.

The key to the assistance tasks approach is that parents and teachers plan and implement them together. Additional tasks that many schools have used include having parents help out with record keeping, filing, coordinating parent rooms, helping with school events, involvement in fund raising, helping out in the library, and many other such activities.

Resource Tasks. In any given school parents and teachers have many talents and skills that are never used. *Again, the planning and organization of parent and teacher resource programs need to emphasize the mutuality factor* (Comer & Haynes, 1991). Here are some examples of resource tasks parents and teachers carry out in some early childhood programs.

- Mr. Johnson is a printer. His job involves editing and proofreading the local newspaper as it is prepared for the final run. He comes to the classroom each year to share with first graders how the paper is put together.

- Ms. James (a second grade teacher) is an experienced pianist. She shares her talent with many of the other classrooms each year and helps out with the annual music festival.

- Mrs. Elson is manager of a local donut shop. Each year she sponsors a field trip to her shop. She takes the children through the steps of food preparation and delivery.

- Mr. Williams is an expert in fishing. He takes his kindergarten class and other children fishing each year. He also visits other classrooms and shares with them a lesson on fish from around the world.

- Ms. Vasquez has been on city council for several years and visits the primary grades each year to talk about how government works.

The organization of parent and teacher resource groups is essential to the effectiveness of this approach. The following are steps that parent-teacher groups can use in setting up a resource or talent program.

1. Organize a group of parents and teachers who are interested in this approach. This group can serve as a coordinating team and as role models for other staff and parents in the school.

2. Utilize various techniques like inventories and questionnaires to gather information on the talents, interests, and skills of parents, teachers, and citizens willing to get involved in a resource sharing program.

3. Conduct awareness activities so that people know what you are trying to do. Have sign up sheets at various meetings and actively recruit people. Parents and teachers need to know the importance of this approach and how to get involved.

4. Develop (and periodically refine) a resource file that includes the talents of various parents and teachers (and citizens willing to participate). Provide examples of how various talents can be matched to curriculum themes and other learning activities.

5. Provide staff development and parent training on how the resource approach works, how it can best be implemented, and training on specific skills people need to have to make the program effective.

In many cases resource programs lead to the use of broader involvement activities within a parent volunteer arrangement. This concept and practice is receiving renewed attention as schools are recognizing the breadth and depth that parents and other community people can bring to the school curriculum (Swick, 1984). Here are some ideas on *organizing volunteer programs* to best meet the needs of the early childhood program.

- Develop clear goals that emphasize that the volunteer program is attempting to provide children with a quality learning environment through positive modeling by parents and teachers.

- Create a flexibly organized system so that parents can participate at times convenient to their schedules and in ways that enhance the learning program.

- Develop specific tasks for parents and other volunteers to achieve during their participation in the program.

- Create a team of parents and teachers who serve as coordinators of the program and who periodically review it to see if the goals are being achieved.

- Provide support and rewards for volunteers so they realize that what they are doing is indeed valued.

Shared Learning Tasks. Learning and doing things together has proven to be one of the most effective parent-teacher-child involvement strategies (Rich, 1987). In the past, parents and teachers have usually been involved in separate learning activities with the idea being that they were in need of different skills. While this is still partially true, *the more recent trend is to involve parents and teachers in shared learning experiences, particularly where the skills and content are of such a nature that the benefits are clear.* Here are some examples of shared learning activities that have proven successful.

- Parent-teacher workshops on communication skills and activities that can strengthen their partnership. Such workshops provide them with opportunities to learn from each other about communication skills and how they can apply these skills to their situations.

- Workshops on positive discipline strategies offer parents and teachers a productive setting in which practical issues and concerns can be dealt with in a problem solving manner.

- Seminars and discussion groups on appropriate learning activities and experiences for children at different ages and developmental stages; with an emphasis on how these activities can be enjoyable and natural.

- Involvement of parents in learning new curriculum content along with their children. Many early childhood programs have involved parents in learning about computers with their children as they are introduced into the program.

Decision Making Tasks. Recent emphasis on the partnership approach to early childhood education has prompted renewed concern about involving parents in decision making activities. Too often, parents are welcomed partners in helping roles but are not encouraged to become fully engaged in the decision making effort (Schaefer, 1991). However, whether it is recognized or not, parents are decision makers in that whatever influence they have on the child certainly effects what goes on at school. Thus, it is only good practice to create and nurture parent involvement in decision making roles (Powell, 1989). The following are some examples of ways teachers have effectively involved parents in this aspect of the family-school relationship (Swick, 1991)

- Individual conferences where parents and teachers jointly plan and implement learning activities for children.

- Curriculum review teams where teachers and parents study and refine curriculum emphases in need of renewal.

- Organization of family-school learning and social activities through joint parent-teacher efforts.

- School improvement councils where parents serve in all aspects of defining and articulating plans for improving all parts of the school program.

- Teacher-parent problem solving efforts that focus on both individual parent concerns and the broader needs of the school and community.

Parents add a new dimension to classrooms and schools when they become involved in the decisions that shape their children's education. The positive outcomes are both numerous and powerful in transforming how children learn and how teachers manage and nurture children and parents in this process (Swick & Graves, 1993). For example, in one school a parent resource team emerged from the work of a teacher-parent study team. This team was comprised of parents who were willing to share their talents related to the different curriculum themes in the classroom. In another school, the parent advisory council played a major role in restoring funding for field trips in the early childhood program. Another example is the impact a parent group had on improving the safety of the school's play area for the children. Additional examples are listed as follows.

- Parent efforts to improve teacher working conditions.
- Teacher-parent efforts to reduce class sizes.
- Facilities improvement through parent work teams.
- Gaining additional resources through parent fund raising.

Advocacy Tasks. Effective parent involvement programs attempt to promote in parents the attitudes and skills for becoming advocates for all children. Many leaders have gained their early experience through involvement in local schools. *Leadership roles* include guiding schoolwide partnerships, initiating stronger community involvement, serving on school boards, involvement in state-level advisory capacities, and many related activities (Davies, 1991). *Advocacy opportunities* include: shaping community policies that are supportive of families and schools; challenging harmful conditions that threaten the quality of life for children and adults; educating citizens on the need for quality schools; promoting school-business partnerships; assessing statewide structures as they relate to supporting effective parent-teacher relationships; and encouraging groups to pursue school improvement strategies at the national level. Examples of parental advocacy achievements in early childhood programs are numerous.

- Improved child care standards at local, state, and national levels have resulted in many cases from the work of parents.
- Improvements in child safety laws were strongly influenced by parent advisory groups.
- Parent involvement in citizen awareness of school needs has been effective in many communities.
- Increased support for summer enrichment programs and extended day school programs have mostly been the result of parent advocacy.
- More accessible early childhood prevention services have been positively influenced by parent leadership.

Methods of Involvement

There are a plethora of ways to involve parents in various aspects of their children's learning and development. Chapter Fourteen presents some of the methods that are used in parent education programs. These methods are applicable to the broader system of parent and family involvement, and additional methods are also included in this discussion. The available avenues for involvement are practically endless. The value of different methods is directly related to three issues: their purpose, the manner in which they are delivered, and the substance of the activities and tasks they generate in the parent-teacher partnership (Swick, 1991).

To be most effective, the following methods of involvement need to be an integral part of one's broader parent and family involvement framework. *In particular, they should be related to an empowering philosophy that takes into consideration all of the various factors inherent in the family-school-community ecology* (Swick & Graves, 1993). Some of the methods described were presented earlier in the parent education discussion. They are repeated here because of their value to the total parent and family involvement program effort.

Home Visits. The home visiting process is pertinent to working with parents throughout the early childhood years. It has proven especially popular with parenting programs that focus on infancy and toddlerhood, and with programs addressing specific needs (Powell, 1990). More recently, child development and kindergarten-primary programs have integrated the home visiting method into their overall educational effort. This involvement method has some distinct advantages: it encourages teachers to examine the child's total ecology; it encourages the use of learning activities in the home; it helps teachers to recognize the unique situations of parents; it offers parents a chance to share their learning environment; and it offers many trust-building opportunities for parents and teachers (Swick, 1991).

Most early childhood programs have multiple reasons for using home visits: increase parent awareness of the need for home learning; develop trust with parents; lay the foundation for a broader set of parent involvement activities; communicate with parents who are unable or not inclined to participate at school; carry out child assessments where parents can observe and participate; and develop a partnership approach to learning with the family (Galinsky, 1988). *A real strength of the home visit is that it provides a personal setting where teachers and parents can explore many different ideas on children's learning as well as on their own growth.*

Typically, home visits are organized thematically with an emphasis on particular learning concepts the children are learning in school. The visits are scheduled according to parent needs, based on input from parents and staff, and usually last from 45 minutes to 1 hour (Swick, 1984). Most programs rely on a sequential system of visits (1 per month, for example) with flexibility built into the plan so that parent requests and concerns are met. For example, one program held monthly visits with the substance of each visit focusing on a key learning area that was being carried out in the classroom (Swick, 1992).

Early childhood home visits are often used to link parents more closely with their child's teacher. Home visitors, for example, might use the visit to arrange for the parent to participate in classroom activities, in school-based parenting programs, or to engage parents on school improvement councils. This method has proven effective in increasing parent participation in other involvement activities (Swick, 1992).

Several strategies have proved effective in the planning and use of home visits. A well-organized plan is a key to success. Establishing a clear purpose, organizing the visiting activities, responding to parent needs, and involving parents in the visits are the basic implementation steps. Advanced preparation and contact with parents increase both participation and the meaningfulness of the visits.

Rich (1988) and Powell (1990) note that a majority of home visit projects have instruction as a primary goal. Activities included usually are based on key learning skills, are short and enjoyable tasks that parents can do with their children, and are related to ways that parents can improve the family's literacy habits.

Training Programs and Study Groups. While previewed earlier in Chapter Fourteen, parent training programs and study groups are elaborated on here because of their significance to the overall parent and family involvement program. Two organizational arrangements appear most often in this regard: *preschool oriented efforts* and *kindergarten-primary oriented efforts*. In more recent years, some integrated programs have created a comprehensive program.

Preschool parent training efforts have focused on preventative activities and strategies (Swick, 1991). Program content usually includes topics such as health, safety, parent-child attachment, criteria for selecting child care, child development information, family stress management techniques, home learning activities, and a variety of other issues (Swick & Graves, 1993).

Children's social, physical, language, cognitive, and emotional development are also included in the substance of most programs.

Kindergarten-primary training efforts usually focus on topics such as: orientation for school, developing parents' understanding of the goals of the program, providing ideas for parents to use in home learning, building a trusting partnership between teacher and parent, communicating regularly with families, and other important topics (Rich, 1988).

Three strategies that have increased the effectiveness of parent training and study groups are: the use of discussion methods, provisions for parent support resources, and involving parents in the development of the programs (Swick, 1993). Discussion methods appear to meet a critical parent need, that of sharing and learning from other parents (Powell, 1989). The use of small group discussion sessions increases parent reflection on the concepts under study and enables them to share their ideas and concerns. Providing needed parent supports such as child care, transportation, and adaptive scheduling increases the chances for parents to fully engage in this learning arrangement (Swick, 1992). For example, it has been noted that parent attendance increases dramatically when these resources are available (Rich, 1987). Parent involvement in program development also increases the potential for having successful activities (Powell, 1989). When parents are attending sessions they have helped to shape, their interest is high and usually the results are positive.

Conferences. Parent-teacher interactions are multidirectional and potentially important forces in the total learning ecology (Comer, 1986). Individual and small group conferences provide a methodology for nurturing the needed intimate and continuing communication that can sustain the growing relationship between family and school.

Both short, informal miniconferences and more formal conferences offer multiple partnership opportunities such as sharing information, getting feedback from each other on mutual concerns, offering each other support, sharing and resolving concerns, planning school-home learning strategies, and carrying out various child-support strategies. Informal contacts between parents and teachers offer a subtle and yet effective means of building rituals that empower these teaching and learning partners (Cochran & Henderson, 1985). The value of teacher-parent conferencing can never be taken for granted; it is a process where support, problem solving, sharing, listening, and meaningful planning can lead to a very productive school-family relationship.

Parent input in shaping conference agendas is critical to the success of this strategy (Powell, 1989). Contacting parents in advance with materials they can use to prepare for the conference is one activity that can stimulate their part in the planning process. Parents need to know that their ideas and concerns are needed, valued, and respected (Swick, 1984). For example, Lawler (1991) suggests that teachers use a part of each conference to acquire parent ideas on how to improve the next conference. Traditionally, conferences have been dominated too much by professionals. Comer (1986) advocates that teachers use parent input to foster group conferences where parent-directed discussions prevail.

Providing an inviting, supportive, and confidential setting is important. Strategies advocated by Lawler (1991) and Swick (1991) include the following.

- Plan for the conference thoroughly, giving particular attention to parent ideas and concerns.
- Create a comfortable setting where parents feel at ease in communicating with you.
- Encourage parent questions (send home in advance a list of questions parents might consider asking) and reinforce in parents your support for their concerns.
- Be an accepting and responsive professional.
- Use meaningful follow-up activities like notes or telephone calls to update parents.

Small group conferences have the potential to become a support system for parents (Powell, 1989). Beyond the information value of small seminars or sharing groups is the emotional and instrumental support that parents can provide each other. For example, Comer & Haynes (1991) note that through parent involvement contacts at school many parents developed new friendships that enabled them to handle parenting and family issues more effectively.

Newsletter and Notes. Classroom-developed newsletters (especially those where children and parents have input) are excellent for keeping everyone informed about school events (Comer, 1986). In addition, they offer a vehicle for getting input, describing special events, encouraging parent and family sharing, and involving parents and children in sharing their talents. It has become a popular means of reaching all parents. *Newsletters that emerge from the early childhood classroom are usually of high interest, especially when* *children have had a major part in producing them.* Notes home on children's progress, children's special achievements, parent reminders of planned activities, and requests for help have also proved useful. *Newsletter Calendars* that include monthly information of interest and importance to children and parents are valuable. Often these calendars include menu plans, information on classroom activities, child achievements, and other plans and important dates. In one study parents noted the newsletter-calendar as their most cherished means of communication (Swick, 1992). With the contemporary technology of computers, this is an efficient and useful means of sharing information. The most valuable newsletter approach requests parent feedback thus promoting bidirectional communication (Lawler, 1991).

Lending Libraries and Learning Centers. This is another strategy for involving practically every parent in some form of family-school activities. *Sample goals for this strategy include:* providing parents with a source of family literacy materials; developing a physical place in the program where parent and family learning is the priority; creating a continuing source of information for family and school needs; and promoting parent-teacher involvement in shared-learning activities (Swick, 1991).

Depending upon available space, resources, and staff, lending libraries vary in their scope, size, and mission. Traditionally, the emphasis has been on sharing information on child development, parenting, family life, and family-school issues (Swick, 1984). *More recently, the move has been toward a more ecological "center" approach.* For example, some schools have developed Family Education Centers where multiple materials, resources, learning opportunities, family services, and extended-day child and family projects are housed and delivered in an integrated manner (Swick & Graves, 1993). This development has been prompted by the increasing need for families to have access to services in one place as well as in response to the diversity of parent, child, and family needs.

Learning Centers are another example of this more comprehensive approach. Vartuli and Rogers (1985) describe such a center that is housed in a library system. It is organized with a room unto itself and is open for about four hours a day, with monthly themes providing the focus. Activities center around things and resources all parents have access to such as kitchen utensils or available library resources. Classroom teachers have used this concept with various modifications, often identifying it as a home learning center. These centers often become a launching pad for many other teacher-parent activities such as study groups, support groups, or adult education projects.

Awareness and Invitational Activities. Early childhood educators have always cherished their efforts to invite and support parents. Ball (1985) provides several excellent ideas in this regard: always greet families with warmth; provide children and parents with a clear idea of the what and how of the program (brochures, videotapes, and newsletters are some tools for this function); hold opening-of-school orientation programs; develop a "common questions that parents ask folder"; post specific times for parents and children to give you feedback (one teacher calls these "My time to listen sessions"); and encourage parents to become an integral part of the program.

Additional invitational ideas and activities include light meal socials, planned phone calls to each family, and "family greeting cards" that focus on positive talents and achievements of family members (Etlin, 1990). Parent-teacher trust-building activities need to include times for getting to know each other within the many realities that they face. Social contacts and informal sharing times are very valuable in nurturing this needed aspect of their relationship (Swick & Graves, 1993).

Warm, supportive relationships with parents establish the foundation for long-term partnerships. Introducing yourself as a person (sending personal notes to children before school opens) is as important as introducing yourself as the teacher (Ball, 1985). Opening meetings with parents should be personal, warm, and inviting, offering them opportunities to get to know you as a person who cares about children. More critical than the facilities and the formal arrangements of family and school programs is the trust and caring that prevail in the relationship (Swick, 1984).

Caring Communications. Far too often parent-teacher communication is hindered by the formalities that prevail within rigidly defined systems of authority (Comer & Haynes, 1991). More modern communication paradigms call for more authentic relationships between parents and professionals (Powell, 1989; Schaefer, 1991). Many kinds of communication are needed to meet the diverse situations of parents and families. Beyond the often used methods of conferencing and written communication, there are several informal and yet very effective strategies: telephoning parents about reminders of activities or brief updates on the child's progress; daily recorded messages on homework tasks and/or key ideas that were covered that day; once-a-week "homework hot line reviews"; and technology based exchanges (popular in situations where modems and other interactive technology exist) (Swick, 1991).

Here are some additional partnership communication strategies: send home weekly student work folders, weekly "notes home" on work covered that week, "Parent Grams" that go out once a month and review key ideas covered in class; set up a parent bulletin board near the most parent-traveled areas of the classroom or school; call parents for monthly feedback; hold small group parent dialogue times; hold morning coffees with parents; have parents come to lunch on a scheduled basis; help parents develop a "parent support newsletter" for sharing concerns and support with other parents; and develop a "Parents Only News Sheet" (Minner, 1989).

Parent-teacher partnerships that have frequent and meaningful communications are usually positive and growing (Lawler, 1991). One way to foster this approach is to involve parents and teachers in communication training sessions together so they can learn and share ways that will enhance their relationship (Swick, 1992). Another means of achieving this method is to sponsor teacher-parent communication activities that promote positive relationship building (Lawler, 1991).

Multicultural training for staff is essential to making this strategy truly effective (Lightfoot, 1978). Teachers need to have experiences where they become familiar with the communication styles of families in different cultures. The positive aspects of various racial, ethnic, and cultural groups need to be emphasized.

Technology and Parent Involvement. Computers and other interactive technologies have become an important way for involving parents and families in schools. Here are four such uses of this technology to strengthen family-school connections (DeWolf, 1990).

1. "Homework Hot Line," run by Instructional Television Center in Broward County, Florida, is produced by the public schools for Broward County's 160,000 children. Help is given by classroom teachers on a variety of subjects.

2. In Chicago, "Homework Helpers" airs three times a week for children in grades 1-4. Teachers present and discuss problems similar to the ones presented in class.

3. In Sacramento, California, two programs focus on homework: "Words Work" and "Math Help-Line" (one hour each). Both programs offer in-depth help on English and Math once a week.

4. "Dial a Teacher" (Fairfax, Virginia) has answered math questions for viewers for five years.

These programs are most effective when parents are involved with their children during the viewing. Teachers have commented that beyond the obvious value of children improving their academic skills is the more supportive relationship developed with children who participate. Individual teachers have adapted this method to their local classroom situations.

A more intimate use of computer technology is described by Swick (1992). He involved parents, children, and teachers in learning how to use computers as a parent involvement strategy. Swick's goal was to involve parents more closely with their children's education. The use of computers was a motivating factor. Ultimately, however, his research showed that computer learning prompted many other involvement benefits: everyone learned how to use computers; parents became more familiar with their child's teacher and school; children received more attention from their parents; other involvement activities emerged from the computer learning project; and parents and children increased their use of computers dramatically.

Homework Strategies. Every parent can use homework as a means to get involved in their child's education. The goal is not for parents to do the child's homework *but rather to support the child in becoming a successful home learner.* This may involve parents in making sure that children have a time and place for doing homework and, most important, that they act supportive in this process. *Teachers have found workshops for parents on practical homework tips to be very effective* (Etlin, 1990). These workshops usually emphasize the following effective parenting practices.

- Talk with your child about the importance of completing home learning assignments.
- Organize the home learning environment to support the child's regular involvement in completing homework tasks.
- Show an interest in the child's homework and be supportive of the child when a problem frustrates their efforts.
- Communicate with your child's teacher regarding homework so that they are aware of your support.
- Take advantage of school and community resources that enhance the home learning process.

Parents should also be encouraged to realize that they are the child's primary learning model (Rich, 1988). The more parents model and encourage good and enjoyable learning habits such as daily reading, the more likely it is that their children will acquire these same good attitudes. Teachers who send home helpful homework reminders to parents find that child performance in homework task completion increases (Mavrogenes, 1990). At a more formal level, some teachers assign short home learning tasks that parents and children can complete together. Others are setting up after-school help sessions. More recently, some teachers have used telephone taped-messages or "hot-lines" to keep in touch with parents on homework concerns. *The important element here is that home learning becomes enjoyable and connected to school learning* (Swick, 1991).

Informal Parent Involvement Modes. The realities of the busy schedules of both parents and teachers have prompted an increase in the use of informal but effective parent-teacher involvement strategies. Some of the strategies are: sending home monthly or weekly student work samples; sending "quick notes" on children's progress or work; sending "positive notes" on the child's achievements; setting up a parent room or corner just for parents; asking parents to respond to surveys or other needs-assessments; offering parents short educational programs on new curriculum material (videotaped backups are helpful for parents unable to attend); and setting up a variety of home loan parent and child activities (Swick, 1991).

Reaching a broader audience of parents can also be achieved through the following: distributing videotaped parent education lessons; organizing parent telephone buddy systems; sponsoring drop-in morning and afternoon visits; organizing regular "contact the teacher" times; and many other methods.

Multicultural Learning Through Parent Involvement. Teachers and parents can be models of cultural and ethnic sharing for children. Many activities can be directed toward this goal. For example, one school holds an annual International Night where parents share food, ethnic and cultural rituals, and other items from their respective cultures. Parent-resource teams is another strategy. Parents serve as resource persons for the classroom, sharing values and materials from their cultural heritage (Galinsky, 1988). The use of family trees and other family history activities also provides a source of information for parents and children.

The major goal of this parent involvement mode is to enrich the entire family's multicultural orientation (Swick & Graves, 1993). Parent and teacher training programs should focus on three critical elements: building positive self esteem in the child (and in parents and teachers); developing pride in one's own culture; and acquiring accurate and positive perspectives about people from other cultures. Major parent and family involvement activities can emphasize parents and teachers as models, acquiring positive attitudes toward people who are different; and developing a sensitivity to the need for multicultural learning at home and school.

Methods for Enhancing Parent Participation

In the rush to create meaningful and inviting parent and family involvement programs and activities the need for supports and incentives is often overlooked (Swick, 1992). *Incentives and support resources have proven critical in the development of successful programs* (Powell, 1989).

Incentives. Several incentives have proven effective in increasing parent participation: indicators of the past success record of the program; clearly defined benefits that are derived from the program; parent leadership who guide parents; examples of how the partnership program works; and specific identification of materials and resources parents and families will receive as a part of their participation (Rich, 1988).

Supports. Effective programs have examined the types of support parents need in order to participate. For example, Swick (1992) noted that a key support was the way the program was designed. He found that with a diverse set of involvement opportunities available, parents increased their involvement. In assessing the program parents noted that the diversity of involvement modes made it easier for them to be a part of the program. *He also found that transportation, child care, and adaptive scheduling of meetings and events increased parent participation significantly* (Swick, 1991, 1992).

Restructuring for Effective Partnerships

To achieve the environment for fully implementing the strategies described in this chapter, some basic rethinking of parent and teacher roles is necessary. The basis of this restructuring is the recognition that parents and teachers have mutually complementary roles that include both distinct and common elements. Their partnerships, if they are to be meaningful, must be based on a realization of these roles in theory and in practice (Schaefer, 1991).

As explored earlier, parental roles include the distinct functions of nurturing, guiding, supporting, and modeling for and with their children the habits, attitudes, behaviors, and skills that promote healthy development and learning. *In pursuit of actualizing these roles, parents need to engage in continual learning and in collaborative relationships within and beyond the family.* In their learning and growth pursuits, parents should seek (and teachers and other helpers should provide) information and resources that strengthen their position to be their children's teachers. This effort might include participating in both formal and informal educational and support activities that increase their abilities to nurture and guide their children as well as to more effectively form partnerships with the family's helpers (Cataldo, 1987).

Likewise, teachers should reconstitute their view of teaching to be inclusive of learning and mutually supportive relationships with parents (Epstein, 1985). In this effort there is a need to see their roles of nurturing, guiding, supporting, and modeling as extending to their relationships with parents and the entire family. *Reaching out to parents through "Right From The Start" strategies such as sponsoring parent/family learning and support centers and promoting community programs that enhance the formative years of the family's life are symbolic of the desired orientation* (Darling, 1989; Epstein, 1985; Swick, 1987). Further support of this parent/family-centered approach should occur through the continuing involvement of teachers in training and related learning experiences that strengthen their understanding and skills for actualizing proactive partnerships with parents and children during the early childhood years (Powell, 1989).

Together, parents and teachers need to conceive of their partnership as growth-oriented experiences in which they seek to nurture each other toward becoming full partners in their support of children's learning and development (Swick, 1991). In this empathetic approach, teachers and parents must begin their journey with high regard for each other, their children, and the partnership they are seeking to develop. This calls for seeing each other as capable people, for listening to each other (and their inner selves) in responsive and supportive ways, and for nurturing each other toward the full realization of our talents.

The various strategies described in this chapter offer multiple opportunities for teachers and parents to seek out ways to help each other become both learners and advocates on behalf of children and themselves. Yet these strategies can never achieve this mission if parents and teachers lack a framework that nurtures their desired partnership. For parents to expect teachers to care for their children without the needed supports and alliances is irresponsible. Likewise, for teachers to see their teaching role as limited to the children in their classroom is foolish. Only as teachers and parents develop a vision of themselves as highly important and positive partners in children's lives can these strategies carry meaning.

Chapter Twenty Three

COLLABORATIVE INVOLVEMENT WITH PARENTS AND FAMILIES

Many of the major problems that schools experience can be traced back to a lack of collaborative relationships with parents. When people lack avenues to have input in the decisions that influence them and their children, they tend to lower their involvement in all related aspects of the process (Comer & Haynes, 1991). In contrast, parent involvement programs that have a fully developed collaboration system report more productive and positive outcomes (Olmsted, 1991).

Schaefer (1991) advocates a more collaborative model for parent-teacher partnerships. One of the goals of programs needs to focus on increasing parents' sense of efficacy as they are the primary and continuing source of support for children. While the collaborative approach is more difficult at the outset, it is also the most influential approach to parent and family involvement (Comer & Haynes, 1991)

Collaborative Decision Making: The Foundation

Inherent in any learning experience is the involvement of the learner in the process of acquiring information and skills as well as internalizing the processes by which outcomes are arrived at (Schaefer, 1991). Parents are key participants in the child's learning and development and thus must be engaged in the early childhood program's decision making system. The collaborative process calls for parents to be intentionally involved in making educational decisions that effect their children. The process begins with their decision making within the family ecology and extends to extra-family contexts such as the school and community. *Unfortunately, most schools and educational systems were not designed to foster this participatory involvement of parents* (Rich, 1988). The basic realities of the parent-teacher and family-school collaboration process need to be recognized and integrated into parent and family involvement programs.

The first reality is that parents and teachers are the key decision makers in shaping the learning environment of children (Schaefer, 1991). When this reality is not recognized, schools tend to isolate parents from the decision making process and often fail to nurture parent skills in collaboration. Yet, even when people avoid the intentional use of collaboration they are still impacting the environment (Comer, 1980). *Joint decisions arrived at through intentional planning efforts and then revised with new experiences and information are the basic means of improving children's learning and development* (Swick, 1984). As parents gain in competence with regards to joining in the decision making process, the benefits to them, their children, and the school are evident in improved social and academic performance (Comer & Haynes, 1991).

The second reality is that parent-teacher collaboration is best achieved through intentional efforts where a process exists to support the logical development of parent and teacher involvement in this joint endeavor (Cochran & Dean, 1991). *Planned program efforts that include educational, social, and support strategies positively influence this partnership.* Beginning at birth, parents should be invited and encouraged to be participants in developing the learning experiences in which their children are involved. Their self-education and development, involvement in the early care and support of their children, and their participation in shaping extra-family experiences for children are essential to the building of a collaborative approach (Schaefer, 1991).

A third reality relates to the nature of the collaboration process: It requires parents and teachers to be engaged in a team effort (Swick, 1984). *Teaming among parents and teachers requires that individuals become sensitive to each others' perspectives on various issues as well as skilled in the communication and problem solving processes.* Training for parents and teachers can foster the development of these skills and the beginning of their collaboration activities.

The fourth reality is that schools must change their system to account for this collaboration approach (Comer & Haynes, 1991). *A major reason that many schools have weak or nonexistent parent participation programs is because they are not structured to achieve it.* A collaboration approach requires a system by which joint decisions and a partnership effort can be realized (Rich, 1988). This means that the school's method of arriving at decisions must be organized to promote intentional parent-teacher planning and implementation activities.

Goals for Involving Parents in Collaborative Efforts

What should be the major goals for a collaborative approach to parent-teacher and family-school involvement? *The long range goal should be to strengthen parents' control over their lives and thus be able to fully function as their children's primary teachers* (Schaefer, 1991). In support of this broad goal, the following collaboration objectives are suggested (Comer & Haynes, 1991; Schaefer, 1991; Swick, 1991).

- Increase parent knowledge and skills for functioning collaboratively within the family system.
- Increase teacher knowledge and skills for developing viable relationships with parents through various parent and family involvement strategies.
- Develop parent-teacher partnership activities that foster a collaborative relationship.
- Increase children's competence through parent-teacher and family-school support services and activities.

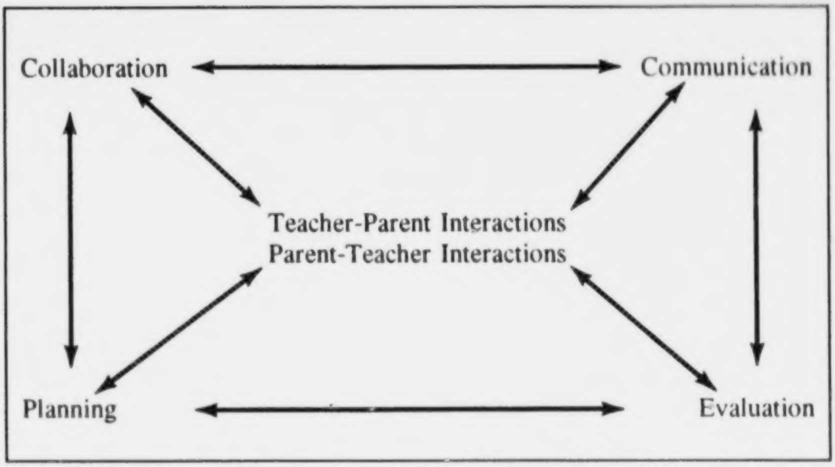
Parent and Teacher Collaboration Roles

Schaefer (1983, 1991) has explored the conflicts and tensions that typically arise within parent-teacher decision making situations. Of major concern is the confusion over roles as well as the lack of effort on the part of individuals to carry out their roles. Communication problems, misunderstandings, and poor parent-teacher relationships result from role confusion and lack of direction in the program structure. Program goals provide direction for the clarification of roles. Roles should provide the process by which productive relationships can be developed (Swick, 1991).

Swick (1991) describes four role-behaviors that teachers and parents should cooperatively use in their teaming efforts: collaboration, communication, planning, and evaluation. *These process roles provide the means by which parents and teachers can establish, nurture, and continually refine their partnership.*

Collaboration is the core of the teacher-parent partnership process (Comer, 1986). It involves parents and teachers in working together on virtually all aspects of the growth process as it relates to the family-school learning ecology. It is a process by which parents expand the potential of their children's environment as well as their own through continuous, planned

Teacher-Parent Collaboration Roles



interactions (Powell, 1989). Joint efforts by parents and teachers in planning the various elements of their partnership (both individual and common ventures related to the learning, doing, supporting, and nurturing roles) are essential to positive and meaningful partnerships. This planning role needs to occur in their individual roles (as in parents planning home learning arrangements) and in joint efforts (as in parent-teacher actions to plan curriculum).

The growth process is rapid and intensive in children, parents, and teachers during the early childhood years. Communication is the means by which these partners support and enrich each other's growth. Examples of this communication linkage are endless: daily interactions between teacher and parent; monthly newsletters; periodic telephone calls; sending home children's work samples; and regularly scheduled conferences (Holloway, 1988). Feedback in the form of continuing evaluation allows the teacher-parent partnership to change as conditions, development, and needs require. It is this part of the collaboration process that offers parents and teachers an opportunity to observe children's growth (and their own), to share with each other their perceptions of that growth, and to then engage in planning how best to facilitate it in both school and home settings (Swick, 1991).

Encouraging Shared Decision Making: Basic Assumptions

Parent-teacher decision making efforts must be based on a set of assumptions that support their strategies and their relationships. A set of beliefs that provide direction to their efforts enables the decision making process to be shared in a meaningful way. Sinclair and Ghory (1980) provide the following as key assumptions for this process.

- Academic and social competence of young children results from the successful completion of a broad range of appropriate activities both in families and in schools, particularly as these activities are reinforced through the interactions of the child with both parents and teachers.

- As the persons who are closest to the learner, parents and teachers together should design and implement educational environments that will assist children in their cognitive, affective, and physical development in the family and school.

- The important variables in the family environment that affect academic competence can be altered to support the learning of children.

- Teachers and other school staff can provide leadership from inside the school to develop a curriculum that appropriately combines family and school environments.

Epstein and Dauber (1991) provide a set of statements that can also serve as basic assumptions in the development of collaborative family-school decision making programs.

- Strengths and weaknesses of the family-school decision making system are assessed regularly.

- Goals, dreams, and visions of what parents and teachers would like to accomplish are clearly developed and communicated.

- Assignment of responsibilities for carrying out specific tasks is clearly delineated and communicated.

- Program activities and systems are evaluated regularly and the results used to improve the operation.

- Program development is continuous with parent-teacher collaboration strongly supported by school leaders and by the community.

Encouraging Shared Decision Making: Some Starters

The security and effectiveness of teacher-parent partnerships require collaborative structures for making decisions. Several avenues are available for promoting parent participation in decision making roles. The natural responsiveness of teachers to the expressed interests of parents as they occur in individual contacts, informal discussions, and in group meetings is most effective. This is, in a very real sense, a way of informally engaging many parents in a subtle yet powerful means of choice making (Powell, 1989). It is through spontaneous decision making experiences that other, more sophisticated strategies can take on meaning. Additional ways of promoting parent participation in this process that require minimal organization are surveys that ask for parent input, daily interaction with parents, observing parent discussions at school events, taking note of parent concerns during regularly scheduled conferences, and conducting telephone surveys of parents on issues related to program changes (Comer, 1986).

Classroom advisory councils, study groups, curriculum assessment projects, problem solving sessions, and schoolwide improvement councils are some formal strategies used for encouraging a shared decision making environment. In carrying out these strategies it is helpful to provide parents with guidelines on how the process works, their roles in making it work, and with an orientation to the specifics of the functioning of the system (Swick, 1984).

These collaboration strategies not only have strengthened the classroom learning effort but also have enabled many parents and teachers to develop their leadership skills. Some examples of projects and achievements that have emerged from these partnership efforts include: well-organized parent volunteer projects, effective classroom and school improvement plans, family-centered learning/sharing activities, parent supported extended-day enrichment programs, parent-teacher support groups, and advocacy teams who pursue community, state, and national improvements related to child and family issues (Swick, 1991).

Comer's Collaboration Model: Some Highlights

James Comer of Yale University has developed and refined a comprehensive ecological model for collaboratively based schools and early childhood programs (Comer & Haynes, 1991). The effort, which is comprised of nine elements, is called the School Development Program. Comer & Haynes (1991, p. 272) state:

> This program contains three mechanisms, three operations, and three guidelines. The key program element is a governance mechanism

> (*School Planning and Management Team*) that is representative of all the adult stakeholders in the school: parents, teachers, administrators, professional support staff (special education teacher, social worker, psychologist, and any other such person in the building), and nonprofessional support staff (clerk, custodian, others). This team carries out three critical management operations: development and implementation of a comprehensive school plan that focuses on both the school climate and the academic program, staff development based on the plan, and assessment and modification of the school program as indicated. *Such a mechanism facilitates communication, establishes a sense of direction, and gives all involved a sense of program ownership and purpose.*

A Mental Health Team is another mechanism in this model. This team addresses developmental and behavioral needs of students and simultaneously and systematically shares team members' knowledge, skills, and sensitivity in the areas of child development and relationships with classroom teachers and administrators (Comer & Haynes, 1991).

The third mechanism is the Parent Program, which focuses initially and primarily on supporting the social program of the comprehensive school plan and then on the academic program as needed. Comer and Haynes (1991, p. 272) explain:

> The social program is designed to enable parents and staff together to aid the social development of students and to motivate them to achieve well both socially and academically. In this way parents are involved in the areas of their greatest expertise and interest.

Three important program guidelines permeate the work of the school in this approach: 1) a "no-fault" problem-solving process; 2) consensus decision making based on child development principles; and 3) collaborative management that does not paralyze the school principal (Comer & Haynes, 1991). The parent program is a critical mechanism in this effort.

The Parent Program Comer's system for parent involvement includes *three levels*: 1) general participation, 2) helping in the classroom or supporting school programs, and 3) participating on the School Planning and Management Team.

The third level, that of participating on the School Planning and Management Team, is the most sensitive level. A small group of parents (5 or 6) are elected by other parents to represent them on this formal decision making body. They also serve on other parent boards so that they are truly in touch with the parent perspective and can represent it on the planning and management team. *Parent participation in this process is crucial as they are in tune with the community and the parents being served.*

The second level is one where parents participate in classroom and school activities on a regular basis. They might work in the classroom as a teacher-assistant. They might help out with broader school activities. This is important because parents gain a sense of ownership in the school, the children see them as active participants, and staff gain a new sense of respect for parent involvement.

The first level is the level in which most parents participate. This is where parents turn out for general activities sponsored at the school. Programs where children perform, special events, and family nights are some examples of general activities the schools held. In these activities parents and staff gain a sense of partnership and mutuality. Many more sophisticated parent involvement activities evolve from participation in these general activities.

Parent-Teacher Curriculum Collaboration

The early childhood curriculum provides a natural context for building meaningful and pertinent family-school linkages. Too often parent and family involvement occurs in ways that seem unrelated to the real meaning of children's development and learning. Swick (1992) explored the use of parent involvement in early childhood curriculum as a means of strengthening parent-teacher collaboration and thus improving the potential of at risk children for school success. *This section of the chapter includes material from Swick's project as it relates to parent-teacher curriculum collaboration.* A more detailed description of that project is available in his book An Early Childhood School-Home Learning Design: Strategies and Resources (1992). While the focus of the curriculum collaboration effort shared here was on kindergarten-primary school, the same process can and should be used during the preschool years.

Known as the *Teacher-Parent Partnership Project*, the goal was to articulate an early childhood school-home curriculum that would promote and enhance children's school success. *An integral part of this mission* was to strengthen the family's learning ecology, improve the teacher's support structure for implementing a family-oriented effort, increase parent involvement in their children's education, and foster productive relationships between parents, teachers, and children.

A key part of the mission development process was the involvement of parents, teachers, and other school staff in developing a curriculum framework together. Teams of kindergarten-primary teachers developed a key concepts curriculum framework modeled closely after the High Scope Curriculum. The professional staff explored the research in early childhood education and identified the key concept areas of social competence, language, math, and analytic skills as the core of the curriculum framework.

Teachers and parents came together in small groups with the support of paraprofessionals called Home-School-Workers to develop a system for individualizing the framework as related to children's needs. This process involved parents, teachers, and Home-School-Workers in teaming activities at school and in the home. The result was individualized learning plans for each child that were related to the key concepts and to the overall curriculum activities delivered in the classroom. A basic premise in the approach was that teachers and parents were collaborators in the curriculum development and delivery process.

Perhaps the most innovative aspect of the project was the use of multiple means of actualizing the curriculum at home and school. A plethora of strategies were used in the classroom such as small group work, individual time on computers, hands-on individualized learning activities, cooperative learning situations, and many other activities. Many different strategies were used to involve parents: home visits, conferences, training programs, informal visits at school, in-classroom involvement of parents, parent-child computer learning activities, and parent-teacher planning times.

In regard to the use of multiple parent involvement strategies, Swick (1992, p. 55) notes:

> A basic premise of the Teacher-Parent Partnership Project was that diversity of partnership strategies would broaden the possibilities for involving parents and teachers in curriculum efforts; particularly as related to the involvement of at-risk families. This premise proved viable in that project findings indicate that parents with different situations and in varying styles selected involvement opportunities that best matched their needs.

Parent-teacher curriculum collaboration calls for a support system that enables these partners to plan and work together effectively. The existence of visible and reliable supports greatly improves the success potential of school-family programs. For example, in Swick's (1992) partnership program the presence of a full-time trained person (in this case the Home-School-

Worker) was significant in creating and realizing needed parent supports. Of vital concern was the intimacy these school-family liaisons were able to bring to the experience. In addition, each team had at least some physical space in the school to place materials and carry out planning. This was essential in giving the program an identity and in providing parents with a place to meet. Further, the availability of transportation, child care, and adaptive scheduling strengthened the participation of parents.

Perhaps the most supportive element was the involvement of parents in choosing their style of participation and relating that style to available situations in the program (Swick, 1992). Parents helped to determine the kinds of activities in the program and assisted in the organizational aspects like scheduling and arranging for needed resources. In addition, activities were scheduled flexibly so that most parents could easily participate. Teachers and Home-School-Workers used their insights (typically gained through observation) to plan activities they felt would be appealing and meaningful. Training sessions, home visits, conferences, and in-school activities were thus delivered in ways that parents were likely to participate.

The teachers and Home-School-Workers were a key factor in the success of the curriculum collaboration. Swick (1992) noted that teachers who had the most collaboration with parents were: warm, supportive, child-centered, sensitive to parents, personable, skilled in parent involvement strategies, and philosophically oriented to this effort. They had things like parent bulletin boards, an organized system for involving parents, regularly scheduled meetings with parents, and specific roles for parents to perform.

The involvement of parents in all aspects of the development of family-school curriculum increased their potential to be effective teachers of their children. Evaluation results showed that indeed parents were more involved, felt that their children were functioning better in school, and planned to continue their involvement.

Teachers and Parents: Learning and Sharing Together

Any true partnership must move beyond the traditional boundaries of the limited and often isolated roles that are assigned (psychologically, if not physically) to parents, children, and teachers (Powell, 1989; Schaefer, 1991). Research on comparative educational models with at-risk communities indicates that participants gain more power when they are active participants in the teaching and learning process (Schaefer, 1991). While the distinct roles of parents and professionals need to be respected, the mutually participatory nature of such relationships must be nurtured. In particular, three factors need to be accounted for: assuring that teachers and parents engage in at least some joint decision making regarding the curriculum; including parents and teachers in shared-learning activities; and nurturing a "sharing relationship" among all staff and parents (Powell, 1989; Swick & Graves, 1993).

There are several means of assuring that parents are engaged in joint decision making activities: Teacher observations of parent behaviors, child behaviors, and family-school dynamics provide one means of determining parent and child interests, strengths, and needs. So often parents and children speak to us through their behavior. Unfortunately, their views are often given little recognition within the decision making framework. Effective collaboration efforts require that professionals listen to and integrate parent and family views into the total decision making process (Comer & Haynes, 1991).

Providing multiple means of gaining parent input and involvement in decision making strengthens the participation process. Parent training programs, for example, provide parents with information on specific aspects of the curriculum and ideas on how they can get involved. Home visits provide a means for reaching parents unable to participate in other ways. The visiting process is especially helpful because it tends to promote high levels of parent-teacher interaction. Small group discussions, individual conferences, and informal contacts are excellent avenues for gaining parent input. An example helps to highlight how this input process can lead to further parent involvement. In one program a mother let the teacher know that her child's language was improving as a result of the home visit activities. The teacher praised the mother's diligence and invited her to extend her involvement to classroom learning activities. Parent-teacher collaboration ultimately has its most powerful influence on the child's engagement in curriculum activities (Swick, 1991).

Another dimension of successful family-school curriculum partnerships is the presence of shared-learning experiences among staff and parents. Too often parents are not treated like adult learners! They are often put in the role of isolated, passive learners (Darling, 1989). Powell (1989) noted the power that exists in environments where parents are allowed to initiate and act on their ideas in concert with their co-learners. One example of this is where parents, teachers, and children learn together about using computers. Learning together as a team helped them learn about computers and much more—they were able to learn about each other and about particular skills and strengths each had (Swick, 1992).

The sharing process needs to be nurtured in all parents and staff. With the common goal of promoting an interesting and high quality learning environment, parents and teachers can collaborate effectively through shared-learning.

Chapter Twenty Four

EVALUATING AND ASSESSING: TOOLS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Parent-teacher and family-school relationships are in continuous need of renewal. Without sources of feedback, partnerships often become static, unresponsive, and rigid (Sinclair, 1980). Unfortunately, evaluation and assessment of the various aspects of parent and family involvement programs typically are neglected or at best given little attention. Yet, every facet of effective parent and family involvement is based on planned, continuous, and ecologically-based assessment designs (Weiss & Jacobs, 1988). While the goal of the evaluation and assessment process may be to determine program effectiveness, the process of achieving this goal is complex and challenging. This chapter includes information on the various aspects of this challenge. Particular emphasis is given to assessment strategies that can be used to articulate effective program practices within the realities of local school and community contexts.

Various Functions Evaluation and Assessment Serve

Before setting up an evaluation and assessment scheme, it is important to determine the functions you want your evaluation to serve. Too often program developers distort the evaluation process by failing to interrelate it with other program components like purposes, strategies, support services, and program refinements (Powell, 1988). *Evaluation and assessment should be integral parts of the entire program system* (Weiss & Jacobs, 1988). Functions that evaluation and assessment serve in most program designs include: needs-assessment, program readiness assessment, implementation effectiveness, parent-program dynamics, process analysis, program effects, and long term influences (Weiss & Jacobs, 1988).

Needs Assessment. Program design elements should be based on a form of preassessment in which parent perspectives, parent strengths and needs, and community context factors are thoroughly examined (Jacobs, 1988). This needs assessment process is most effective when it is comprehensive and shaped in a manner where continuing feedback is planned. The following are the types of questions that need to be studied at this point in program development.

- What are the major needs to be addressed as articulated by parents?

- What needs have emerged from staff observations?

- How do these needs interrelate with the broad mission of the program?

- How can the program best meet these needs given its scope, resources, and other parameters?

- What cultural, social, economic, and literacy variables in the community need to be accounted for in program planning?

- What priorities seem to be emerging from the preassessment process?

The needs assessment process aspect of evaluation provides the tool for creating a sound basis for goal setting, selecting strategies for implementation, and related design planning (Swick, 1984).

Program Readiness Assessment. A key question programs need to ask is: Are we ready to achieve the goals established as a result of the needs assessment process? Effective program implementation can only occur when their is some match between desired outcomes and available resources to achieve these goals (Weiss & Jacobs, 1988). This readiness process includes staff and parent attitudes related to the program, existing resources, staff skills and training, the interrelationship between program design and desired outcomes, and other important elements. Questions such as the following are helpful in assessing program readiness.

- Have parents and teachers examined their readiness to participate in collaborative efforts that are inherent in parent involvement?

- What kinds of training experiences are needed to help prepare staff and parents for meaningful program participation?

- Are program resources (facilities, materials, funds) adequate for carrying out the kinds of activities needed to achieve program goals?

- Have adequate time and resources gone into preparing the program system for effectiveness?

Implementation Effectiveness. The most common evaluation carried out in parent and family involvement programs is that of determining the effectiveness of the implementation process (Swick, 1984). End of the year evaluation forms, periodic feedback forms, staff and parent assessment of specific activities, and continuing documentation of various project events are some of the means used to achieve this type of assessment (Epstein, 1984). Recording the completion of activities along with some qualitative report on each activity is carried out by most programs. Some programs use inventories and questionnaires to provide more elaborate data on the value of particular events or for total program assessment. Further, questions such as the following are usually included in the process of evaluating the implementation process:

- What activities were used to achieve particular goals and objectives?
- How were these activities carried out?
- What support methods were used to enable parents to participate in the various activities?
- How effective were these support methods as assessed by parents and staff?
- What activities and strategies emerged as most useful in the parent view?
- What strengths and needs were noted in the implementation process by the staff and parents?
- What improvements in implementation strategies have been articulated as a result of the evaluation?

Parent-Program Dynamics. The relationships between program and parents are the most influential aspects in shaping successful outcomes (Powell, 1989). Recent program evaluation research suggests that programs examine these relationships. For example, do parents have input into the activities in which they participate? Are parents treated as equals in the program process? Are adaptive program strategies used to meet parent and family schedules, needs, and interests? Does the program use appropriate adult teaching strategies like cooperative learning, discussion groups, and hands-on activities?

In many cases well planned programs fail to achieve their goals because they have not accounted for these relationships. The following are questions that can be used to assess the program's potential to respond to the various dimensions of parent-program dynamics.

- Have parents been involved in shaping program goals?
- Are parents' talents and skills capitalized on in the design and implementation of various activities?

- Do the staff and parents have equitable and mutually responsive relationships?

- Are adaptive scheduling and other supportive methods used to maximize parents' participation opportunities?

- Are parents' cultural, social, demographic, and related attributes considered in program design and implementation?

- Do parents have regular opportunities to assess program activities and recommend refinements?

- Are parents serving in leadership roles such as sharing their skills, collaborating in instructional efforts, networking with each other, and mentoring to other parents?

Process Analysis. The methods and strategies that programs use to achieve their goals need continuing scrutiny (Weiss & Jacobs, 1988). For example, Powell (1990) notes that home visiting is essentially a process activity that is often defined more by the dynamics of relationships between parents and home visitors than by program designers. While the intent may be for home visitors to instruct parents on particular child development activities, the process may become restructured toward having the home visitor tutor the child as a result of parent requests. Thus, on-going assessment of the home visit process can produce data that provides more refined direction to it. Likewise, analysis of parent discussion groups has noted that in many cases discussion topics are not oriented to parent-perceived needs (Powell, 1988). Similar assessments of newsletters, conferences, and other parent involvement methods are needed. The following provide some direction to this process.

- Are program methods designed and implemented in ways that parents are significant parts of the process?

- What assessment techniques are used to monitor the process aspects of program implementation such as home visiting, small group activities, and related strategies?

- In what ways do staff examine the process aspects of their work such as their interaction patterns with parents and their involvement in relating to parent and family needs?

- How is process analysis data used to refine and improve program strategies, particularly with regards to strengthening parent-staff relationships?

Program Effects. The impact of parent and family involvement efforts on various people and processes is of interest to most everyone (Weiss & Jacobs, 1988) For example, studies have examined the influence of parent involvement on children's school achievement (Swick, 1991). Specific school performance variables studied include: attendance, behavioral indices, social competence, academic performance, and many other elements. In addition, the influence of parent involvement on parent self image, teacher functioning, and related factors have emerged more recently (Powell, 1989). Questions such as the following are frequently examined in program effects studies.

- What effects are program activities apparently having on the parent involvement patterns of parents?
- What effects are program activities apparently having on parent-teacher and parent-child relationships?
- What effects are program activities apparently having on the school ecology?
- What effects are program activities apparently having on children's school performance?
- What effects are program activities apparently having on various parent behaviors?

Long Term Influences. Longitudinal analysis of the impact of parent and family involvement is of particular interest to program funders, public policy makers, and program developers (Weiss & Jacobs, 1988). This facet of evaluation has gained more significance in the past decade as the emphasis in education has shifted toward more preventive practices. Parent involvement is now being viewed as a preventive factor in children's long term development and as a societal means of preventing antisocial behaviors (Swick & Graves, 1993). Long term impact studies are exploring the possible relationships between parent involvement and the following types of issues.

- What is the long term influence of parent involvement on various parent behaviors such as their relationships with the school, the child, and the community?
- What is the long term influence of parent involvement on various child behaviors such as school attendance, performance in school, completion of school, later educational aspirations, and later life performance?
- What is the long term influence of parent involvement on various societal factors such as the community's safety, health, and well being?

Parent and Family Involvement Evaluation Assumptions

Effective evaluation, whether of a large or small scale program, must operate upon some basic assumptions. Weiss and Jacobs (1988) and Powell (1988) provide insights on assumptions that programs need to integrate in their evaluation framework.

Systematic and Program Related. The evaluation process needs to be construed as the *systematic* collection and analysis of data that is program related (Weiss & Jacobs, 1988). The process needs to be designed according to the program goals and mission. Universal evaluation constructs need to be adapted to the local program context. What data is needed to answer the key questions being asked by the program? In effect, the evaluation has to fit the program. For example, while it is usually important to collect data on the attributes of participating parents and families, this data collection needs to be organized in a manner that has specific value to each program (Swick, 1991). Likewise, program effects data will vary from program to program because each program has a different purpose.

Evaluation As Program Integrated. Every program should have an evaluation component (Swick, 1984). Further, the evaluation process needs to be an integrated part of the total program system. Too often, programs slight the evaluation component because they lack the needed skills for designing it or they fear that the process may be too limited (Jacobs, 1988). *At minimum*, every program should be able to articulate the beliefs upon which they are functioning, describe changes in the program's direction as it evolves, and document the basic activities carried out (Swick, 1991). In this same regard, programs should aim to match program efforts and activities with assessments that provide useful and supportive feedback. For example, regular parent feedback has been noted to improve the operation of parent volunteer programs. It has also been documented that parent and staff discussions on program activities lead to improved program content and methods (Powell, 1989).

Evaluation As Promoting Pride. "Evaluate no program until it is proud." (Campbell as cited in Weiss & Jacobs, 1988). Rather than limit evaluation of programs to data collection and analysis, the positive value of program efforts need to be recorded and shared at each step of development. At the outset, programs can record accomplishments and use them as sources of pride to build further plans. For example, a recent parent education program provided child immunizations to over 50 children. By publishing a piece in the local newspaper on this activity they received many positive phone calls and offers of help. Evaluation should not only offer us ideas of improvement but should also serve as a means of positive reinforcement.

Evaluation Emphases. Evaluation of parent involvement efforts can take on many emphases. An important element is to know what purposes the evaluation process is going to serve for the program (Powell, 1988). For example, required evaluation elements may include documenting the delivery of certain services. Program developers may want to assess how particular methods work, what strategies are most influential, and/or how parents and staff relate to each other (Swick, 1991). Program goals and the evaluation process should function interactively with each influencing the other. Evaluation can, for example, provide information that dictates needed changes in the substance of the program (Powell, 1989). One program found that their goals were not targeting the major needs of teen parents and thus redirected their efforts (Powell, 1988). In this same perspective, evaluation needs to be guided by program goals.

Evaluation As Comprehensive. While it is time consuming and requires considerable resources, *comprehensive evaluation* is essential to obtaining a complete picture of the program's development and functioning (Weiss & Jacobs, 1988). Parents, staff, resources, scheduling, content, and methods all need attention within the evaluation process. Further, these elements need to be viewed in an interactive manner. Parent-program dynamics are of particular importance and are often neglected in the evaluation process (Swick, 1991). The participation of parents in program activities should not only be documented but examined with regards to how activities influence parent attitudes, knowledge, and skills. Staff functioning, use of resources, and long term needs are additional factors of importance in comprehensive evaluations.

Evaluation As Supportive of Service Delivery. Effective evaluation supports the delivery of program activities and services (Weiss & Jacobs, 1988). Too often evaluation is seen as an imposing requirement that interferes with the main goal of the program. Needed resources, skilled staff, and allocated time and space for carrying out the evaluation process will support its integration into the overall functioning of the program (Powell, 1989). For example, programs that use evaluation and assessment as integral ways of developing and refining activities and services point to the process as essential. Goal development, selection of strategies, implementation procedures, staff and parent relationships, and long-term planning *need the sustenance that authentic evaluation can provide* (Dym, 1988).

Evaluation As Continuing Feedback. The very notion of evaluation implies that one is taking stock of a situation or process. It is this concept of acquiring feedback with regards to program actions that Weiss & Jacobs discuss as the very heart of the program growth process. In the development of parent and family involvement programs, *early childhood educators need to ask how and why their efforts influence the partnership approach they are using* (Swick, 1984). What needs are at the foundation of the program? How were these determined and who was involved? What longitudinal assessments need to be considered? How can the feedback process best be structured? Continuing, longitudinal data collection should be a key part of every parent involvement program. While short-term feedback is helpful, continuing assessment provides a mirror for adjusting and refining the complex dynamics of parent-program interaction (Epstein, 1984).

Evaluating Parent Education: A Comprehensive Approach

Parent education has emerged as one of the most significant parent involvement strategies of the 1990's. The emphasis on the ecological framework is seen in the recent efforts to provide parent education, adult literacy and training, child services, and parent/family services within program designs (Swick & Graves, 1993). Thus, the evaluation and assessment process is especially important to the development of parent education components within various program structures. Jacobs (1988) provides a comprehensive evaluation approach in this regard. It includes five levels of assessment and evaluation: Preimplementation, Accountability, Program Clarification, Progress Toward Objectives, and Program Impact. Further, this approach advocates the inclusion of all the stakeholders in the evaluation process. Each evaluation level is briefly discussed.

Preimplementation. This is or should be the initial level of evaluation carried out in all programs. It establishes the basis for all subsequent evaluation efforts through a comprehensive needs-assessment. The purpose, breadth, depth, and structure of the program are initially determined through preimplementation activities such as parent interviewing, stakeholder planning efforts, client surveys, case study activities, and through many other means (Swick, 1991). Defining the purpose, establishing the needed system for achieving purpose, and articulating the role that continuing evaluation can play in the program are some of the major outcomes of this level of effort.

Accountability. As its name implies, this level of evaluation focuses on collecting data that documents the planning and delivery of services articulated in the preimplementation level (Jacobs, 1988). Program monitoring data on services delivered, to whom, when, where, and how—are essential to documenting the program's efforts and for providing stakeholders with some level of trust in the program. Jacobs (1988, p. 56) states it clearly:

> A program should be able to report that, in a particular time period, x number of families were provided y amount of service at a cost of z. Evaluation at this tier does not require documentation of success in attaining the client-related goals and objectives detailed at Level One. Nor does it demand that program staff use the information collected to modify the program in dramatic ways, although presum-

ably, utilization figures and case material will raise issues to be addressed regarding service delivery.

Program Clarification. This level of evaluation helps programs "make use of the information generated in previous stages while encouraging them to draw on staff and participant feedback to monitor and improve program operation" (Jacobs, 1988, p. 57). The key question asked at this level is: How can we do a better job serving our clients?

Staff insights play a major role in this evaluation effort. Staff observations, parent feedback, actual program data, and other program and client data should provide the substance of this level of evaluation. The goal is to examine the program with the purpose of making sure that goals, activities, resources, delivery systems, and related program-parent dynamics are working in the manner that was intended. Process information, case management data, survey results, and staff discussion of these data should offer insights on the emerging identity of the program. This level provides an opportunity to examine the program's effectiveness within the realities faced by emerging parent education efforts.

Progress Toward Objectives. This level of evaluation suggests that a program has been in existence for some time, thus having had a chance to achieve some of its goals. Jacobs (1988, p. 59) describes the major focus of this level.

> Thus, at Level Four, the evaluation landscape shifts dramatically. First, there is a move toward objective measurement of program effects. Second, accountability for client progress (or lack of it) as distinct from accountability for service provision (as at Level Two) is emphasized. Third, activities are staff and resource intensive: Staff members are required to help formulate measurable indicators of success, collect various new types of data, and maintain written communication of the units of service delivered. Programs often enlist professional evaluators to help design and implement these evaluations.

Program Impact. This is the most sophisticated level of evaluation that programs undertake. It is a longitudinal effort that involves analysis of all aspects of the program as they influence the effect of the program on the participants, the staff, and possibly the community (Jacobs, 1988). This form of evaluation is indeed inclusive of past assessment data, program development data, and impact data gathered over the life of the program. For example, the influence of the program on parent attitudes, knowledge, and behavior is examined within a multidimensional research structure. This level of evaluation calls for a major program commitment and for highly trained evaluators.

The Parent Education Evaluation Match. Jacobs wisely suggests that parent education programs seek a "match" between their evaluation goals and their available evaluation technology limits. Too often ambitious evaluation plans short circuit the effective delivery of program services (Swick, 1991). While model research evaluations are indeed needed, programs need to define the limits of their evaluation reach within the realities of their purpose and resources. For example, an acceptable limit for one program might well be to document and assess services delivered with the intent of program refinements. Yet another program may seek to assess parent perspective regarding the value of specific program services. Program purpose (as guided by selected needs assessments) should provide the basis for finding a match between program operation and evaluation.

Tools for Evaluating Parent/Family Involvement Efforts

Various methods and tools exist for the purpose of evaluating parent and family involvement programs. Program goals, structures, and functions should guide the selection of the evaluation tools process (Swick, 1984). Some tools involve the development and use of instruments while others are more process oriented and guided by staff and parent observations. Use multidimensional evaluation tools as they typically provide a more inclusive and ecological picture of program effectiveness. Other cautions include: relate the evaluation tools clearly to your goals; integrate these tools with the natural operation of the program wherever possible; avoid relying on assessments that simply reinforce your beliefs; encourage parent participation in the development and review of the evaluation; and periodically examine the tools being used (Swick, 1991).

Preassessment Tools. The pre-implementation assessment process is critical to all other aspects of the evaluation. The goal is to achieve a sense of purpose that is realistic, guided by both family and school needs, and achievable within the existing resources (Swick, 1984). One often used method is inventories. The following is one example of how this tool is often designed.

1. List in order of importance the needs, topics, and issues you feel are most important for inclusion in the program this year.

____

____

2. Tell us ways you would most like to have available for getting involved in our program this year?

____

____

3. Please identify the times and days of the week most convenient for you to attend group meetings.

Days: ___________________________________

Times: __________________________________

4. Do you need child care available at the group meetings? Do you need transportation to get to the group meetings?

____

____

5. In your opinion what is the most reasonable length of time for a program to last? ________________________

6. Would you be willing to serve as a parent program contact person this year? ___________________________

Preassessment also needs to address parent and staff views on important issues and content for a total program focus. For example, staff discussion of needs they see as critical for parent education, parent support resources, and parent-teacher communication need close attention. Staff analysis of needs can stimulate a listing of priorities that are then shared with parents. For example, one faculty group identified literacy enrichment, home learning, positive discipline, and parent-teacher communication as their priorities. However, when these were shared with a parent group the parents added: parent-child relations, ideas for handling nightly homework, and suggestions for managing television as additional needs. A parent-teacher planning team took these ideas and developed an agenda for the year that was inclusive of all of the ideas presented as important needs.

Continuing Feedback Tools: As noted earlier in this chapter, continuing feedback is vital to getting a picture of how the program is working. Two important things can happen through feedback: problems can be resolved immediately, and future program efforts can be improved (Swick, 1984). One tool that can be helpful in this regard is the *Feedback Form*. The following is a sample form used by one school.

Haywood Parent & Teacher Feedback Form

- Tonight's group session was______________________________
  ____
- The speaker was______________________________
- Group discussion sessions were______________________________
  ____
- The learning materials for home use are______________________________
  ____
- Tonight I learned______________________________
- For next month I suggest______________________________
  ____

Feedback can also be obtained through informal discussion, staff observation, and through more formal assessments. Powell (1989) found that through the use of a specified staff observer at group meetings many new ideas on parent desires and concerns can be articulated.

Annual Program Assessment Tools. Acquiring a picture of how effective parent and family involvement programs are should occur at least annually. Various means can be used to accomplish this task. The key is to provide multiple ways for parents and staff to assess what took place, how effective the delivery of different activities and services was, what impact and value the program had, and how can it be improved (Comer, 1986). The goal is to assess the overall program in terms of parent satisfaction and in terms of its usefulness. *Three means commonly used for this purpose are:* parent-teacher evaluation teams, staff analysis of completed activities, and program questionnaires.

Parent-teacher evaluation teams usually focus on the overall effectiveness of the program. What worked, what did people assess as very helpful, how was attendance, what needs to be changed, and how can we learn from what we did this year? Emerging from the work of such teams are many ideas for program refinement.

Staff analysis of the various program activities is also helpful. In this way specific program needs can be articulated. For example, one faculty group noted that more time was needed to have effective conferences. Another group noted that the scheduling of activities needed to be more adaptive.,

Supplementing and enriching parent and staff evaluation efforts is the use of an annual evaluation questionnaire. One page questionnaires such as the following provide an overall feedback system. The purpose is not to acquire detailed assessments of the program but to gain the broader picture through parent and staff responses.

1. This year's parent and family involvement activities were:
   a) very helpful to me as a parent (as a teacher).
   b) somewhat helpful to me as a parent (as a teacher).
   c) not very helpful to me as a parent (as a teacher).
   Explain:

2. Parent-teacher conferences conducted this year were:
   a) very helpful to me as a parent (as a teacher).
   b) somewhat helpful to me as a parent (as a teacher).
   c) not helpful to me as a parent (as a teacher).
   Explain:

3. The most valuable part of the parent and family involvement activities held this year was:

4. In future years I think the parent and family involvement program should have the following activities:

Program Component Evaluation Tools. Programs typically have several different components. Each component can be improved through specific assessment activities. Parent volunteer activities, home visits, group seminars, parent-teacher conferences, lending libraries, and other components can benefit from individual assessments.

Parent Volunteer Programs. Evaluation of the effectiveness of parent volunteer activities is helpful in sharing with others the value of such activities and in improving the program. One way to accomplish this is to keep a record of the who, how, what, when, and where of the program. Such a record serves several purposes: document the various accomplishments of parents, provide a data base on parent skills and talents for future use, and provide a system for determining the value of different volunteer services (Swick, 1984). The following is just one example of a record keeping system.

Parent Volunteer Record

Volunteer	Date	Contribution
Mr. James Estrada	3-12-95	Shared his expertise in space technology with the children.
Ms. Ellen Fitt	9-2-96	Talked with the children about her work at the chemical plant. It was informative but I need to ask her to use simple terms with this age child next year.
Mrs. Yuanita Arms	9-14-96	Took us on a field trip to the senior citizens center she directs. We learned a great deal and have plans to do work at the Center yet this year.

Home Visiting. As this strategy gains more emphasis the need for evaluation is critical. Like other strategies, the home visit has different functions. It is important to acquire feedback on how the visits are serving the primary purpose of the early childhood program. Evaluation tools range from simple review forms (see the following example) to highly sophisticated assessments (Powell, 1990).

Home Visit Form

Family Visited	Date	Comments
Mary & Jim Walk	1-15-94	This was our third visit. Mrs. Walk is very pleased with John's progress both at school and at home. Her husband has started doing some of the activities with John too!
Ireta Moses	7-10-96	Ireta is very pleased that we can come to her home. She is very confined with taking care of her mother. Yet she wants to be helpful in supporting her child's educational activities. A great deal of work is needed with Kevin, especially in helping him to gain some confidence.

Group Seminars. Small group parent and parent-teacher discussion and study seminars can benefit from observational types of assessment. Group dynamics, topic selection, time usage, and other process-variables have been studied through observation (Powell, 1989). Notes taken during observation (or tape recorded) can later be analyzed for several purposes: determine the flow of discussion, get feedback on parent interests, improve group leadership, and refine the structure of the discussion context (Powell, 1989). Purpose, organization, materials, leadership, and participant satisfaction are particular areas in need of attention.

Conferences. Parent-teacher conferences have become a very popular means of communication. Teachers frequently comment that assessment of such conferences adds greatly to planning and implementing future communication activities with parents (Swick, 1984). The following is a sample form one teacher developed for evaluating her conferences with parents.

Parent-Teacher Conference Evaluation

1. The purpose of the conference was clearly defined and discussed with the parent(s)?
2. An inviting classroom arrangement encouraged the parent(s) to participate fully in the conference?
3. Conference details (purpose, date/time, place) were communicated to the parent(s)?
4. The topics discussed at the conference were ____________________

   ____

5. Parent concerns or ideas expressed during the conference were

   ____

6. Conclusions reached as a result of the conference were arrived at through mutual agreement with the parent(s)?
7. Adequate time was left for the parent(s) to ask questions, share information, and make suggestions?
8. A follow-up plan for addressing the tasks identified in the conference was developed?

   ____

Lending Libraries. Early childhood education programs have found the lending library to be especially popular with parents and children (Ball, 1985). Initially, this practice involved simply the dissemination of parent and child reading and learning materials. It is now expanding to include training, technology resources, parent networking, and related support services. Assessment of this practice is most often accomplished through keeping usage and service records. Annual parent evaluations of the value and helpfulness of these centers is also becoming common practice. Belton Elementary School uses the following record keeping system as a means of getting some ideas on parent usage.

Lending Library Usage Record

Person	Item Borrowed	Returned
Tina & Jeff Johnson	Cultures picture kit	7-9-96
Rita Alvarez	Pre-reading series 2	8-19-95
Lonnie Jones	Math blocks	12-9-95

It is also useful to conduct annual parent assessment of the value, relevance, and substance of the lending library. Ask parents to help identify new materials and resources for the library. Also, have them review the scheduling, organization, and usage system. Some programs have found it very helpful to use a parent-teacher review team to analyze the library on an annual basis.

Program Effect Evaluation Tools. With expanded interest and funding for parent education, the interest in the effects of programs on parents, children, and families has increased. *One dimension of this process is the influence programs have on parents' behaviors, attitudes, and knowledge* (Powell, 1989). Does the program change the way parents function? Do they acquire the desired knowledge and behavior implied in the program's goals? Do they spend more time with their children? Is there an increase in the use of positive discipline practices by parents? Assessing program impact on parent behaviors is complex and challenging. Observations, interviews, parent self-reports, and questionnaires are some of the tools used in this process. Swick (1984, p. 163) describes a home support inventory used for assessing the level of support in the home for the child's educational involvement.

> The Home Support Inventory, originally developed by Paul, contains items which relate to parental involvement within the home setting. It asks parents to respond to questions regarding their direct and active involvement with their children. Data from the inventory can be used to determine the level of support a child has within the home learning environment.

A parent and home assessment tool often noted in the research is Caldwell & Bradley's HOME (Upshur, 1988). This instrument involves the user in visiting the home, interviewing the parent(s), and observing the parent-child interaction pattern. It attempts to assess the developmental, social, educational, and overall parenting pattern.

Another example is the Parent As A Teacher questionnaire (Upshur, 1988). Developed by Strom, the PAAT is designed to assess parent attitudes toward their children and to determine feelings and values concerning child behavior.

Another dimension of this aspect of evaluation is the impact programs have on children. Given the mission of schools to positively influence children's school achievement, this dimension is an evaluation priority for many schools. The question often asked is: What are the effects of parent and family involvement on children? Academic, social, and behavioral effects are usually the main concerns. For example, some studies have shown increased school attendance, improved behavior, and increased academic performance in children when parent involvement increases (Weiss & Jacobs, 1988).

Methods used to accomplish this type of assessment include standardized tests, readiness assessments, developmental assessment profiles, teacher observation check lists, case studies, and combinations of these methods. Beyond the traditional one-dimensional child assessments, more contemporary approaches advocate using multiple assessment tools in order to acquire a more ecological perspective (Powell, 1989).

Longitudinal Evaluation Tools. What is the long term influence of parent and family involvement on parents, children, and families? This form of evaluation has gained attention with the focus on assessing how various educational interventions influence the ecology of human learning over the life span. Long term data collection on outcomes likely related to parent and family involvement provides a global picture of possible influences of improved parenting and family life. Swick (1993) provides a listing of longitudinal data elements one parent education program design is using to assess possible influences of parent involvement.

Data Collection Elements For Longitudinal Study

Parent/Family At-Risk Data Elements

1. Percentage of infants born to drug-addicted mothers.
2. Percentage of low birth weight newborns in the population served.
3. Percentage of single-parent families.
4. Percentage of child abuse and neglect cases in the population served.
5. Percentage of families receiving federal or state assistance.

Parent Performance & Achievement Data Elements

1. Percentage of parents receiving prenatal care in the population served.
2. Percentage of parents participating in WIC (or equivalent services).
3. Percentage of parents participating in monthly parent involvement activities.
4. Percentage of parents enrolled in Adult Education or Job Training.
5. Percentage of parents completing High School Diploma or GED.

Child Performance & Achievement Data Elements

1. Percentage of children judged ready for school.
2. Percentage of children who are successful in the primary grades.
3. Percentage of children who exceed the national norm for their grade level.
4. Percentage of children who complete High School.
5. Percentage of children who pursue post-high school education.

Evaluating Parent And Family Involvement Programs

A parent and family involvement program can be improved through continuous assessment. Through the continued use of proactive evaluation, feedback can be acquired relative to the effectiveness of the different program components. Future involvement efforts can be strengthened when the participants have closely examined what works and what needs improvement.

There are many examples of where programs have failed because of a lack of comprehensive assessment. For example, the content of the program may not relate to the perceived needs of the participants. The delivery system may not match the work and family schedules of the parents. Program activities may lack appeal and thus actually discourage parents and families from further participation (Swick, 1991).

There are many ways to assure that everyone is involved in establishing the basis of the program. Direct involvement of parents and teachers in needs-assessment activities is one way. Others include: engaging parent volunteers in small group discussions; conducting home visits to acquire a realistic picture of family needs; holding study group sessions with parents; and observing the needs of parents and children who attend the school (Swick, 1984). This process of articulating program needs should be revisited often. Needs change, priorities shift with community changes, and families experience changes as they confront developmental shifts.

Evaluation must attend to the primary claims of the involvement process as it emerges within the dynamics of parent, teacher, and child interactions (Swick, 1991). For example, early childhood parent-oriented education designs typically have two sets of claims: one set deals with the more obvious and desired outcomes such as increasing parent understanding of child development or improving parental attitudes toward their children; a second set of claims, which is more subtly defined by the participants within the ongoing structure of the program, deals with issues such as helping each other increase their levels of family support or sharing with each other child-care concerns and resources (Galinsky, 1988). While not as measurable, these subtle claims deserve very special attention as they often serve as a floor of security and well-being for the more formalized claims. For example, it has been noted that paraprofessional home visitors who were very close to the families they visited spent more time being responsive to these subtle identity needs than did lead teachers who were more concerned with parent education outcomes as defined in their mission (Swick, 1992).

A similar process has been noted in parent-teacher conferences where the agenda is more reflective of teacher needs than of the comprehensive needs of families (Dunst & Trivette, 1988). Examples of other distortions of the parent and family involvement process include that of meeting agendas reflecting the wishes of only a few participants, newsletter content dominated by teacher needs, and the unintentional exclusion of culturally different families from the overall program process (Ascher, 1988).

When integrated into our planning and development, both formal and informal parent and family involvement claims provide a source of strength for promoting meaningful activities. A balance of attention to child and parent needs as well as to family-community needs is essential to having successful programs. As Powell (1989) notes, a balance of attention with regard to the partner's involvement and proposed benefits in family-school efforts is desired.

Program leaders need to continually assess the overall effectiveness of their efforts. Questions such as the following can provide a beginning to this process.

1. What was the original purpose of the program? Have the program activities focused on attaining the goals articulated? What adaptations of goals and activities have taken place as a result of assessments?

2. Have the various programs, activities, and projects been successful? How many people have participated? What were the reactions of these

participants to the programs and activities? What changes have resulted from their feedback?

3. How have the various program activities supported the development of stronger families and stronger schools? Has the family-school relationship been strengthened?

4. Is the program reflective of input from all of the participant groups? For example, does the program have multicultural activities? Is the planning team reflective of the community's various populations?

5. Is the program designed to promote continuous parent and family involvement? What organizational structure exists to promote ongoing involvement?

Chapter Twenty Five

TOWARD FAMILY CENTERED PROGRAMS

The past fifty years have been a period of revolutionary change in which societies have experienced complete transformation in economic, social, and educational systems (Galinsky, 1990). We now live in a global society that requires a high level of literacy and sophisticated levels of social competence. These needs call for families to be more educated, have a better understanding of what it is that makes us human, and to be sensitive to the complexities of living in a constantly changing world. In responding to these challenges it is clear that families must have better alliances with their helpers in the community. The lack of such alliances, along with a deterioration of the value and context of parenting, has prompted severe stress in today's families, especially in families who are just beginning to experience the early years of the family journey (Boss, 1988).

The challenges confronting families are in many respects a microcosm of the larger problems in our society. Left unattended, these stressors erode the family's identity and promulgate enormous problems for communities (Swick & Graves, 1993). *While the development of family centered early childhood programs will not resolve all of the stressors inherent in the revolution we are experiencing, they will have a significantly positive influence on two of the most critical human ecologies: the family and the school* (Swick, 1991). It is likely that such supportive family systems will also have long term positive effects on communities (Comer & Haynes, 1991).

Elements For Creating Family Centered Programs

The move to create family centered early childhood programs requires five elements: 1) the development of a new construct of parenting and teaching that is relevant to the new challenges facing families and schools; 2) the formation of a system by which families and schools can initiate their relationship early in the life span; 3) a restructuring of schools toward a family involvement model of education; 4) the creation of school-community alliances that are truly supportive of families; and 5) the articulation of public policies and strategies that will undergird the need for a stronger family-school relationship (Anastasiow, 1988; Comer, 1986; Epstein, 1991; Haskins & Adams, 1983; Rich, 1989; Swick & Graves, 1993).

A New Construct of Parenting and Teaching. Whenever dramatic social change occurs, society's basic leaders are challenged to find new ways of functioning. This is indeed the case for parents and teachers, where change is begging for both a strengthening of roles that historically have sustained families and schools, and for developing new ways of carrying out these roles in response to a changed environment (Ascher, 1988). For example, recent research shows that with the increased stress children experience they need even more nurturance and guidance from parents. Yet research also shows that parents must find new ways of carrying out these roles within this new social environment (Boss, 1988; Popenoe, 1988). Given that parents need more time, skills, and resources to effectively negotiate their roles, it is critical that they not only see themselves as family leaders but that the larger society also views them as important and provides them with supportive resources (Pence, 1988).

The construct of parenting that needs to emerge is one where parents are viewed as family leaders, as individuals who are intimately engaged in helping their children (and themselves) become fully competent. Within this construct, parents are expected to focus on their primary mission of family building as well as create the needed linkages to the community. This view of parenting calls for support structures that emphasize an education for parenthood that encourages parents to acquire an image (and the needed skills) for becoming individuals who grow through parenthood. In this sense, parenting is seen as a covenant with the community that seeks to promote healthy children and strong families (Blazer, 1989).

Likewise, teaching needs to be revisioned as a covenant with families and the society that is primarily focused on supporting the development of competent human beings (Blazer, 1989; Comer, 1986; Swick, 1991). In renewing the teacher paradigm, three contextual issues need close attention: validation, training, and support for a cadre of highly paid teacher/caregivers for the preschool years; redesign of the focus of training early childhood teachers' experiences toward a family-focused program; and a refinement in the role-structure system that places the emphasis on the "educator" and "caregiver" aspects of early childhood as opposed to the more limited construct of "teacher" (Swick, 1991).

In the role of educator, teachers of young children need to "image" themselves as guides, teachers, and models who are designing and managing learning ecologies that promote humane and growth-oriented practices in children and their parents. This enlarged and more responsive vision of teaching must also be grounded within the total system, inclusive of home, school, community, and the larger society (Garbarino, 1982). It is especially important that early childhood educators include these "systems" in their thinking and planning. One dimensional (child-only) programs have suffered from a lack of insights from parents and citizens. To be truly responsive the early childhood program must have a foundation that is symbolic of the total ecology (Comer & Haynes, 1991).

The appropriate paradigm for early childhood teachers is one in which they see themselves as "in covenant" with the entire family for achieving human competence in a shared, sensitive, and compassionate manner (Swick, 1991). And in pursuit of this covenant, families are seen as arenas of strength and potential greatness rather than as arenas of weakness and potential disaster.

Family Centered Programs: New Designs. The most significant focus of recent school reform efforts has been on creating strategies that bring families and schools closer together (Kagan, 1987). Within this focus the most substantive efforts have been on creating family-school linkages as early as possible in the lives of parents and children. Learning does not wait until parents and children reach the formal school years. By the time children and parents reach school they have already developed habits and behavior patterns that are important to their learning style. The case is the same for teachers who shape their relationship patterns for working with families early in their career. Two essential design elements emerge from this perspective: *initiate family-school partnerships during the preschool years, and engage parents and teachers in training situations where they can acquire skills for working with each other* (Swick, 1991).

In order to carry out these elements, the structure in which families and schools function must be changed. A brief review of the current ways that parents and teachers function (especially as related to the contexts in which they operate) is enlightening with regard to some of the needed changes. Beyond the courageous and innovative efforts of a few family centered early childhood programs, there are few attempts to create a life-span paradigm regarding family-school relationships (Davies, 1991). For example, typically parents see their role as confined to the basic maintenance of child and family needs during the preschool years, carrying out what efforts they can to assure the family's well-being. Teachers tend to define their identity within the immediate descriptors of their teaching position (e.g., "I teach first graders" or "I teach preschoolers"). Further, most school and community leaders perceive the school's beginning point with kindergarten (in some cases including four-year old child development). This observation is not meant to be a negative commentary on this situation, but rather to indicate the needed rethinking of the structure by which teachers and parents become engaged (Swick & Graves, 1993).

This rethinking needs to include several components: a redefinition of the family and the school's role in children's learning; a revision of how early childhood educators are trained; the development of a structure by which relationships are initiated early in the family's life; inclusion of parent education material related to the parents' role in family-school partnerships; and an extension of these components into the comprehensive school system. Essential to the success of this transformation process is a reformulation of how schools are staffed and how they function (Swick & Graves, 1993).

Redefining the family and the school's role in children's learning should be based on current research that shows the importance of having capable adults intimately involved from the beginning of children's development. This intimate involvement can occur (as it does in programs like Parents As Teachers) through parent-child interactions that are guided and supported by parent educators (who can reside in schools or in school-community collaborative settings). Further, this structure should include a comprehensive team of family helpers in the areas of health, counseling, education, social work, and related areas (Comer & Haynes, 1991). It is vital that this structure be a recognized entity within the school's system, and that it is funded as an important element of the total educational program (White, 1988). It also requires collaborative arrangements among community groups and agencies.

Training of early childhood educators must be refocused on promoting in teacher/caregivers a family centered approach. This refocusing should include training components that provide teachers with skills in home visiting, parent education, family-school involvement, interagency collaboration, family life content, teacher-parent partnership skills, and related family centered skills (Swick, 1991). While these training components presently exist in bits and pieces, too often they are ignored in favor of mostly classroom centered training activities. These practices need to be fully integrated into the early childhood years.

Early childhood programs need to be organized so that family-school partnerships begin at birth and continue throughout the early years of life. This organizational system might include particular outcomes (arrived at through cooperative planning by parents and teachers) desired for the family and the school to achieve for each year of the child's life. For example, a goal for the first year of life could be that a parent educator works monthly with the family on appropriate developmental learning activities, supports the family in acquiring needed health and social services, and functions as a bridge for the family in helping them to link up with needed community and school resources (Dunst & Trivette, 1988). Inclusive in this new system must be *check-points* where the family and the school can take stock of how this partnership is working. Vital to the effectiveness of this process is the involvement of parents in decision making activities where they take on the primary role of educators of their children. As this organizational scheme is created, it must be integrated throughout the entire early childhood program so that, for example, primary grade teachers consider the family as the key point in the learning process (Schaefer, 1991).

Parents need to be encouraged and supported as they reshape their role in children's learning and development. While early childhood parent education programs have achieved an enviable record in engaging parents in learning about child development and related topics, similar achievement needs to be attained in helping parents articulate a more comprehensive identity as related to their role in children's learning. Unfortunately, in far too many cases parents still see teaching and learning as the sole domain of the school. This incorrect stereotype has had negative influences on the lives of many children and their parents. Parent education content and strategies need to emphasize the nurturing, guiding, and teaching roles that parents can carry out during the preschool years. Further, content on parental roles in linking the family to the school and community (roles such as collaboration, problem solving, and decision making) is needed to fully promote a quality learning setting for everyone in the family (Anastasiow, 1988; Comer, 1986; Galinsky, 1988; White, 1988).

The elements used to restructure early childhood programs toward a family centered paradigm must also permeate the entire fabric of school systems (Swick, 1991). Innovative efforts and strategies suggested by Davies (1991) and Rich (1987) offer beginning points that schools can use in restructuring themselves so that parents and teachers are in continuous communication, working with each other to create success-oriented learning designs for children that extend throughout the school years.

Toward A Family Centered Model. While the early childhood years provide the natural beginning point for establishing a family centered approach, schools and communities need to structure themselves for a life span system (Albee, Bonds, & Monsey, 1992). The elements needed in a quality family centered early childhood program can also serve as the basis for the continuing involvement of families in school and community activities. Elements needed in this effort include: helping parents sense that they are needed and wanted as full partners; involving parents in educational experiences that address their parenting and personal needs; supporting families in developing healthy ways of living; providing resources and supports that address the special needs of families; and integrating into the curriculum and instructional process content and strategies that promote learning exchanges between families and schools (Coleman, 1987).

The foundation for a family centered model is in the thinking of the professionals who provide leadership in schools and communities. A broader vision is essential. The needed philosophical reorientation necessarily will involve school leaders, teachers, and citizens in developing new ways of seeing the role of the school. Critical to any family centered structure is the thinking of professionals and others who carry out the practices that will support it. For example, school leaders need to model a family approach in their decision making. The planning of services, curriculum, and opportunities for school-family involvement needs to be considered in light of family needs (Swick, 1984).

In thinking family centered, schools must first reorganize themselves around a philosophical premise that places the roles of the family at the center of their decision making. In light of this premise, school decisions need to be considered within a framework that attends to the following questions:

- Who are the families we serve? What do we know about the parents and children who are a part of our schools? What are their needs, interests, talents, and strengths?

- What do we know about ourselves as professional educators? How are we organized, trained, philosophically oriented, and structured? Are we skilled in "thinking family" in relation to the program decisions we make?

- What are our schools like? Are they clean, safe, indicative of active learning, inviting to children and parents, and organized around a family involvement theme?

- Do we have programs that reflect a family centered school such as child development, parent education, family centers, extended-day enrichment programs, flexible conference scheduling, and practices that reflect a "curriculum for caring" approach?

- How are school decisions made? Are parents and teachers intimately involved in collaborative decision making at the building level? Are parents, teachers, and citizens involved in shaping school policies at the district level?

- What practices exist that reflect an ongoing belief in parent-teacher partnerships: parent resource programs, teacher-parent communication, parent rooms, parents as tutors practices, home learning projects, parent education, and other such activities?

- How is the curriculum and instruction process structured and implemented? Are curriculum resources and practices reflective of family involvement? Are instructional strategies reflective of a family-school learning partnership?

Rich's (1987) premise that schools need to be arenas where parents and teachers are building an environment in which home learning is used in collaboration with school learning to build productive lifelong learners is paramount in this family centered paradigm. Three elements of this premise are critical to promoting this philosophy: the development of intimate school-family interaction and planning; the creation of a school-family curriculum for caring; and the extension of this orientation into the community (Swick & Graves, 1993).

Schools need to become intimately involved with families in the planning and nurturing of healthy learning environments. Until recently, isolation may well have been the best descriptor of how schools functioned. Beginning with the earliest years of the child's life, parents and educators should be interacting, supporting, planning, assessing, and acting in collaboration with each other to create healthy places and systems in which all members of the family-school team can learn (Swick, 1984). Benchmarks of family centered schools of today and tomorrow will be parent-teacher planning teams, parent-teacher teaching teams, family centered places and activities, and an intimacy among parents and teachers that reflects their covenant to create success-oriented learning environments (Comer, 1986).

In carrying out this covenant, a family centered curriculum for caring must permeate the instructional and social ecologies of the family and the school (Blazer, 1989; Davies, 1991). Such a curriculum needs to address the issues involved in what makes human beings "human" and how we can promote prosocial behaviors in all members of the learning team (Kotre & Hall, 1990). Through the use of teacher training, leadership renewal, parent education, and citizen support, the key social skills for creating a nurturing environment can be pursued. These include positive self image, prosocial relationships with others, development of multicultural understandings, sensitive and empathetic relationships, nurturing and positive discipline practices, creative problem solving strategies, continued dialogue among learners, and other proactive and caring practices (Caldwell, 1989).

A collaborative partnership among school and community groups is essential to nurturing and supporting this curriculum for caring (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Alliances with industry, interagency collaboration, and school-community sponsored family support practices should permeate the entire family-school-community relationship.

Needed Alliances In The Family Centered Model. Research on how individuals and groups learn and develop in healthy ways indicates that effective human functioning requires a strong support system. This is an integral concept in family centered early childhood models. Isolation destroys any human learning system. Families and schools must have alliances with various community groups in order to carry out their mission and to relate that mission to the goals of the broader society. Indeed it is families and schools who provide this societal system with energy through human resources (Sagan, 1987). The interactive nature of social systems dictates that they interrelate and yet support the individuality of each.

In particular, communities need to be in covenant with families and schools regarding the mission of creating learning environments where children can grow and succeed. Everyone in the community needs to see the education and well-being of children and families as their priority. Schools must not be asked to handle this role in isolation from the very sources it serves. There are many natural linkages between what goes on in families and schools and the community: learning, work, leisure, social planning, human development, and all of the dynamics that emerge from these events and experiences (Comer, 1986). Likewise, there are many community services that are essential to having healthy schools and families: health, social support, economic development, spiritual nurturance, cultural enrichment, and information sharing. The natural interactive nature of these human systems needs to be reinforced in the work of community and school leaders.

Communities can provide three very valuable contexts for creating productive alliances with families and schools: service, support, and collaborative learning (Swick & Graves, 1993). In service contexts, alliances can be created through partnerships that provide health care, family counseling, education, safe neighborhoods, sources of spiritual and social growth, job training, and other services that strengthen families and schools. Alliances are needed that relate such services to the needs and interests of parents, children, and teachers, especially during the early childhood years when they can serve as points of growth for those in critical need (Boyer, 1991).

Community support contexts are emerging in the form of school-business partnerships, cooperative school-work programs, school advisory teams, *school-community improvement projects, and other such alliances* (Comer, 1986). New alliances are needed to create family support practices such as flex-time, more adequate family leave time, quality child care, and better child and youth community service projects. Ultimately, schools and communities need to work in concert to create family centered environments that place parents and children as the top priority.

Public Policy For Family Centered Schools. While the various relationships between social systems is complex, it is clear that public policy and public domain actions strongly influence how families and schools carry out their work (Haskins & Adams, 1983). Some examples of how this dynamic process works may help to highlight the need for attending to this critical factor in the creation of family centered early childhood programs. Childhood immunization (a life saving and social cost-saving medium) against life-threatening diseases, which is dependent upon public support, tend to move in the direction that public policy sets. When funding for education and immunization services is solid, there is usually a reduction in serious childhood diseases. When funding is reduced we typically see an increase in such diseases (Edelman, 1987). With adequate public support, educational and medical efforts are very effective.

Another example, specific to the early childhood years, is that of public involvement in promoting quality child care. Where public policy promotes adequate licensing standards, supports the development of quality programs, and advocates for family centered approaches, the results are usually encouraging (Swick & Graves, 1993). Unfortunately, child care is often a low priority and thus teacher training, safety standards, and family support strategies suffer from a lack of needed support (Edelman, 1987).

It is essential that public policy makers promote the exploration of strategies that will increase the efficacy of parents and teachers (Swick, 1991). This is particularly true with regards to practices that will bring parents and teachers closer together to become more powerful in shaping quality learning environments for children. During the formative period of family life, particular needs that require urgent attention are: health care, prenatal care, child care, safety, literacy needs, economic resources, family counseling, and parent education (Boyer, 1991). Just as our nation engages in economic and military infrastructure planning on a continuing basis, so it must engage in the ongoing study and planning of family and school infrastructures (Galinsky, 1990).

An involved citizenry can influence policymakers to consider ways to strengthen families and schools. Parents and teachers, being closest to the human development process, need to be advocates for public policies that support community awareness and involvement in family and school issues. Through their involvement on city councils, school boards, planning groups, and federal and state government agencies, parents and teachers can strengthen the policy system that so strongly influences family and child development (Davies, 1991). In addition, their involvement in church and civic groups can broaden this reach to include almost every facet of the community.

Specific needs and issues that require urgent attention include: improved and accessible health care; policies that support more family time; community-centered mental health resources that stress prevention; affordable and quality child care; family friendly workplaces; inviting schools and safe and healthy communities (Swick & Graves, 1993).

Likewise, families need *time* *to shape their identity and to nurture each other toward positive and meaningful ways of living* (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This need calls for a shift in how families function, particularly how they spend time together. It is both a quality and a quantity issue that is interrelated with all of our society's values (Galinsky, 1987, 1990). Not only are practices such as extended paternity/maternity leave and flexi-scheduling needed, but there is a corresponding need for parent education on the importance of parent-child attachment and nurturance. How time is spent together is just as important as what time is spent together. The use of parent mentors and peer groups in connection with parent education is an effective means of promoting this process (Powell, 1989). Further, everyone needs to urge policy leaders to restructure how our communities function so that families are encouraged to spend time in supporting each other.

Preventive and corrective mental health practices are essential to promoting quality families and communities (Albee, 1992). The many stressors such as work-family conflicts, rising educational demands, job displacements, and increasingly unsafe communities, require more proactive social competence. The integration of counseling and parenting supports into quality child care programs is one approach that has proven effective. The quality of child care needs to be vastly improved and more closely integrated with family centered practices (Engstrom, 1988).

Family supportive workplaces and safe and nurturing communities are a powerful web of security and meaning for families and schools (Edelman, 1987). The symptoms of high crime, poverty, and illiteracy that are present in so many communities are often destructive of family and school efforts. Families and schools need a web of resources that support and enhance their efforts to create quality arrangements for children and themselves. For example, recent research shows that high quality child care, neighborhood crime prevention programs, family-friendly workplaces, and enriching leisure activities greatly enhance the family-school systems (Swick & Grave, 1993).

School also need a public policy system that promotes their ability to function as centers of family learning (Boyer, 1991). Swick (1991, pp. 163, 163) describes the needed focus:

> Funding should be directed to reshaping early childhood programs toward more emphasis on school-sponsored birth to three years of age family centered projects; interagency-designed parent education activities; quality preschool child development programs; adult literacy courses (with emphasis on nonformal delivery systems); school-family planning and study teams; school-business cooperative resource and improvement projects; and school-community integration of education with other human services.

Three dimensions of this restructuring process need major attention: intraschool reorganization, school-family partnership training, and community-wide realignment of the elements that critically influence family and school missions. The many aspects of these needs will require continued study, but the basic framework needed is shared for purposes of setting a direction for the future.

While school restructuring has gained many vocal adherents, few people have given serious thought to the core of this vital need: *organization of the school ecology so that a viable family-school relationship can be attained* (Epstein, 1985). Various roadblocks exist within most current school arrangements: physical structure, staff organization, training, remnants of an outdated school philosophy, isolationism of teachers, lack of resources, and other truly limiting factors (Lightfoot, 1978; Swick & Graves, 1993). For example, the combination of the traditional one-classroom teacher (isolated from other teachers), along with little or no planning and communication time, clearly creates antiparent involvement structures. And with few resources to handle current classroom needs, many teachers find themselves in a double-bind when it comes to supporting parent involvement needs. Lack of training, poor leadership, and a static school ecology all tend to push parent and family involvement toward the back of the priority list (Swick, 1984).

Several components that are worth pursuing with regard to forming family centered schools are: develop parent-professional learning teams, plan and use teaching teams, develop regularly scheduled parent-teacher planning times, involve teaching staff in parent involvement training, carry out schoolwide parent involvement assessments, sponsor parent-teacher leadership training, and engage staff and parents in developing school organizational systems that will facilitate their goals (Epstein, 1985).

Training for parents and teachers is essential to promoting family centered schools (Comer, 1986). This training should be as comprehensive as possible. Several components deserve attention: philosophy of teaching/parenting, parent and family life education, parent involvement skills, communication skills, and family-school-community teaming (Swick, 1991). Ultimately, this process should be extended to include teachers and parents in joint learning experiences that focus on issues and skills for developing partnerships. This process should promote a better understanding of the roles and relationships that need to be supported and integrated into parent-child-teacher interactions. A teaming approach to learning should be the desired outcome, one that is nurtured throughout the training process (Hopman, 1987).

An important part of this training should involve teachers in learning about the roles parents perform on a daily basis. The goal is to acquire a better concept of what today's parents and families really confront in their lives. *Finally, public domain work and family policies need to be reorganized so as to support and promote teacher-parent involvement* (Galinsky, 1990). Parents need released time for regular planning sessions and teachers' efforts need to be a part of their professional work load. These are realistic practices and have been used in some innovative community efforts (Comer & Haynes, 1991).

Teacher Roles for Creating Family Centered Programs

Teachers' and caregivers' potential influence on children and families is substantial. Purkey and Novak (1984) point to the invitations that teachers send (or do not send) to children and parents as critical to the creation of success-oriented learning. These messages are given through attitudes, relationships, expectations, human responsiveness, and in other ways. Rutter (1987) noted that positive teacher attitudes, well-planned instruction, and close teacher-child involvement escalated child achievements in school.

Beyond the school's system for involving families, there are many things teachers can individually pursue to empower families. *They can begin with their focus on relating to the child's total well-being*. Dimidjian (1989, p. 47) states:

> Whether early educators are working with a child of three or eight years of age, the basic tenet is to ensure that they view and educate

> each child as a developmental entity who needs appropriate placement in an early education setting where opportunities to learn are offered as developmental processes and where empowering adults interact to develop the child's mind, body, and social-emotional domains of personality.

An attitude of openness to the real problems children and families face and to using one's support system to relate to these challenges is integral to a family centered teaching approach. Rigidly defined classroom environments isolate children from many of the sources of empowerment they need. They also lead to overwhelmed, and thus often disenchanted, teachers. A team approach that reaches out to the total family ecology is essential. As Dimidjian (1989) notes, we are *developmental interaction specialists*. She identifies 12 critical roles strategies individual teachers can use in promoting a family centered early childhood program: observing, designing, facilitating, nurturing, exploring, guiding, modeling, disciplining, assessing, referring, and teaming.

In correspondence with the concept of matching roles to needs, early childhood educators attempt to relate their emphases to the needs of individual children and families. For example, with some children the role of guidance may need emphasizing while with other children the focus may be on nurturing. Yet in the larger context of classroom all of these roles are essential to creating an empowering environment.

Each child and family needs individual attention as related to the application of these strategies. LeTendre (1990) notes that teachers need to expand their involvement through the roles of catalyst, broker, coordinator, coach, and others. Children's context and behavioral patterns vary, and thus their needs call for particular strategies. The following are child and family strategies that teachers have found useful in resolving different risk factors.

- Provide the child with adult mentors who can guide him or her academically and socially. This is particularly important for children who lack a consistent father figure.
- Connect parents to needed counseling services. This is especially needed in families where one or more adults are abusive or confronting addiction problems.
- Link children to needed speech and language services. More children than ever appear to be suffering from a lack of language-enrichment experiences.
- Involve children in preventive tutoring programs that focus on one-to-one language development and reading improvement activities such as in the Reading Recovery Program.
- Engage parents in needed adult education and job training activities. Wherever possible locate and deliver these services in nonformal ways.
- Involve children in social skills training such as listening, sharing, helping, and communication activities.
- Structure the classroom to provide maximum levels of personal attention to children.

A five-step system for coordinating these strategies and roles is suggested by Dimidjian (1989).

1. Obtain and use proactively the child's developmental history to formulate a learning plan based on strengths and needs.
2. Identify any current developmental delays or special needs as well as overall growth patterns, developmental strengths, or special gifts and skills.
3. Develop an individualized program of intervention and desired outcomes and procedures for reaching these goals.
4. Plan for ongoing communication and cooperation with parents and other adults in the child's ecology.

5. Record regular observations of the child's changing behaviors to be used in periodic evaluations and conferences with parents and staff.

Research has noted three particular empowering strategies that all teachers should use consistently with children and families (Benard, 1992). These are: caring and support, projecting high expectations, and offering opportunities where children (and families) can find connections and meaning in their lives. Benard (1992) provides some examples related to the caring/supportive teacher reported in the literature. One example is from Werner's (1987) Kauai Study and deals with role modeling. Two elements are cited: "the teacher as confidante" and "the teacher as positive model." The caring and supportive teacher is indeed a source of power for many children, particularly those in at risk environments. Whether it is through tutoring, special activities, or simply providing the child with daily encouragement, empowering teachers has far-reaching effects on families.

Researchers (Edmonds, 1986; Rutter, 1987) found that teachers and schools that establish high expectations (and provide the support to achieve them) have very high rates of success. For example, many high-risk communities have high success rates for children in school and one of the determining factors is that they foster high self-esteem and promote social and academic success.

High expectations must be matched with a plethora of opportunities for participation and involvement in the learning environment. Rutter's work (1987) is instructive. He found that in schools with few problems, children were given a lot of responsibility. They participated in the school's total program, were treated with respect, and they responded positively to this type of environment.

Family centered instruction has been noted as a major strategy for responding to the needs of children (Powell, 1989; Rich, 1987). The combination of parental involvement in home learning activities and their participation in family-school learning systems is a proven strategy (Swick, 1991). Some examples of this family centered approach help to convey the power of this approach.

- Educate parents about the school's curriculum and assist them in finding ways to support this program at home.
- Organize home learning modules for parents to use with their children to supplement classroom learning.
- Conduct home visits that include parent education on key concepts the children are learning in school.
- Set up family learning centers (include books, magazines, and toys) that promote a total family literacy focus.
- Involve parents in various classroom and school support roles.
- Engage parents in decision making activities and collaborate with them in this process.

Toward A Framework For Empowering Families

Early childhood education offers the best opportunity for responding to family needs in a sensitive and comprehensive manner. When organized for family centered learning, early childhood programs create a proactive team within the family that ultimately improves the community. This approach emphasizes the development of positive, preventive, and supportive means of strengthening children and families. The following is a synthesis of the key elements of a framework that can be used to promote empowered families. These elements include the philosophical basis, a proactive assessment system, collaborative planning, prevention oriented strategies, comprehensive community support, and school-family strengthening activities (Swick & Graves, 1993).

Philosophical Basis. Family strengthening is based on a philosophy of early childhood education that values the total involvement of every family member in the learning and teaching process. This philosophy, as discussed in various sections of this book, should reflect an ecological-empathetic orientation toward families that aims to empower everyone. *Three key elements are: ecology, empathy, and empowerment.*

The ecological element references the need for an inclusive framework regarding school-family relationships. It calls for including all of the aspects of the family and the family-school systems in the planning and delivery of activities and services. Perhaps this element is best represented in the urgent need for a more protective social system for infants and young children from parental and societal practices that are abusive, neglectful, and ultimately quite destructive (Fontana, 1992).

The empathetic element focuses on understanding and relating to families in positive and supportive ways. It calls for relating to families and ourselves from a perspective of strength, while also articulating and addressing needs that may be inhibiting the development of these strengths. The power of adult attitudes and values related to children and families is most indicative of this element (Caldwell, 1989).

The empowerment element is the process by which early childhood professionals and families enter into mutually supportive activities. The nature of these activities should evolve from a responsive and sensitive professional-family relationship. *The basic premise is that families are growing, dynamic human learning systems that thrive on support and meaningful interactions with empowering early childhood teachers.* Autonomy promoting programs and practices such as parent education, child care, and family support projects are important indicators of this empowerment element (Powell, 1989).

Proactive Assessment. The real meaning of assessment is in the process by which collaborating parties arrive at mutually agreed upon challenges and means to achieve these goals. It is best achieved when it is initiated early in the development of family-school relationships through sensitive, sharing, and supportive means (Swick, 1991). Teacher-parent visits, sharing of insights on each other's contexts and perspectives, and the articulation of the focus of their mission are clearly the beginning steps in this venture. Using comprehensive sources of growth-promoting information such as parent knowledge, teacher insights, family histories, and parent/teacher observations are proven strategies. A positive and proactive focus is essential to building trust between,parents and teachers. This process needs to be continuous, nurturing, and pride-building (Jacobs, 1988).

Collaborative Planning. Perhaps the weakest part of school and community efforts to support families is the lack of a truly collaborative relationship. Collaboration means to respect and cherish the other person's position in the human development process. Early childhood educators can begin this process very early in the family's life through both community and school efforts. For example, parent education programs and related family literacy projects can be initiated during the preschool years. A significant part of these early contacts with parents must be the involvement of professionals and parents on collaborative issues such as: What are the critical family and school needs with regards to children's development? What resources are essential to meeting these needs within the total system of the family? In what ways can early childhood professionals and parents engage in mutually supportive efforts to improve the human ecology for children and themselves? The communication tools of listening, observing, continuous sharing, responsive analysis, and teaming are vital parts of this empowerment effort (Comer & Haynes, 1991).

Prevention Orientation. Healthy families have a sense of power when it comes to helping each other and with regard to functioning in the community. The essential elements in families for developing this sense of power are: caring relationships, good health, literacy, social skills, and a sense of faith in their common identity (Fowler, 1989). Early contacts with families need to emphasize services that nurture these patterns of living. By enabling families to develop healthy ways of living, proactive and positive relationship patterns are promoted. For example, the simple realization that proper prenatal care and consequent reductions in low birth weight newborns does in fact increase the power of child and parent is indicative of the potential of prevention (Olds, 1988). More parent and family centered planning and service delivery are renewing the focus on prevention efforts (Albee, 1992).

Comprehensive Support. The needs of families in general and particularly those in at risk situations dictate that early childhood professionals provide comprehensive programs. Again, these efforts need to be life-span in design, with the emphasis on prevention during the critical early years and carried out within interagency community systems (Swick & Graves, 1993). Planning frameworks need to envision large scale efforts inclusive of neighborhood and community security, enrichment opportunities for families as well as more traditional services like parent education, health care, quality schooling, and social supports. This needs to be a total community effort with early childhood planning teams providing the framework (Hamburg, 1992).

School-Family System. Ultimately, early childhood programs can empower children and families best when the strategy framework is based on a school-family system design. This system, of course, must be "nested" within healthy community contexts. Sporadic family involvement activities are useful but limited in their long range influence. The focus of a systems framework is on establishing and maintaining a continuing relationship with families. Included in such designs are goals shaped by parents and teachers, success-oriented early schooling practices, multiple parent involvement avenues, and a school-home curriculum emphasis (Rich, 1987).

The realization of every person's potential is the goal of truly empowering early childhood education. It is through sensitive, empathetic, comprehensive, and collaborative school-family-community efforts that this goal can be achieved.

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